

Environmental Crisis and Ecophenomenological Praxis

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For my beautiful son who arrived in the middle, my much-missed mum who never saw it completed, and my amazing wife who carried me all the way through.

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List of Abbreviations

Works by Merleau-Ponty

<i>PP</i>	<i>Phenomenology of Perception</i>
<i>IPOP</i>	<i>In Praise of Philosophy</i>
<i>EM</i>	‘Eye and Mind’
<i>SNS</i>	<i>Sense and Non-Sense</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Signs</i>
<i>CRO</i>	‘The Child’s Relation with Others’
<i>PrP</i>	‘The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences’
<i>SB</i>	<i>The Structure of Behaviour</i>
<i>VI</i>	<i>The Visible and the Invisible</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>Humanism and Terror: The Communist Problem</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France</i>

Abstract

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It is a relatively uncontroversial observation that huge advances in our scientific understanding of the ‘issues’ constitutive of our environmental crisis haven’t brought about the requisite attitudinal and behavioural changes to disrupt them at root. In this thesis, I pursue the suspicion that this problem may be traced back, in part, to the violence already implicit in the limited, objectivistic, and often dualistic models that natural scientists offer of those ‘issues’ and the more-than-human world more broadly. Since tackling the behavioural and attitudinal violence of our crisis situation also requires tackling the conceptual violence implicit in the basic terms of debate, I argue, then a specifically Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is uniquely well-equipped to attend to the task in hand.

I begin by exploring the benefits of using phenomenological tools to disrupt the scientific naturalist stronghold on ontological and epistemological matters where the more-than-human world is concerned. Scientific naturalism’s problems appear to derive from its inability to fully acknowledge the intentional salience of the scientist’s situated embodiment to the phenomena she encounters and only subsequently carves up according to certain (meta-)theoretical assumptions and exclusionary apparatuses. By establishing a keener focus on the epistemic primacy of one’s phenomenological opening, I argue, a Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology (suitably informed by ecofeminist and new materialist insights) promotes attention to a richer range of ontologically real phenomena than might be otherwise admitted. Moreover, whilst such an ecophenomenology needn’t be entirely hostile to important scientific insights about ‘environmental issues’, it may also foster a heightened kind of critical self-reflexivity about the problematic commitments and sedimented assumptions which underwrite them. Thus, by engaging with the environmental crisis ecophenomenologically, I argue, we may begin to disrupt the colonial violence which underpins it.

I then defend Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology against various iterations of the charge of ‘correlationism’, which holds that, insofar as they retain an ‘introverted’ focus on situated experience, ecophenomenologists themselves effectively subsume the more-than-human world into a problematically violent anthropocentric or androcentric purview. Since Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists deny the basic ontological presuppositions which underpin the charge, however, I argue that it is misdirected. Moreover, by acknowledging the indissoluble tension between one’s immanence and the more transcendental claims one might wish to make about the more-than-human world, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists may establish a more fruitful praxis of critical self-reflexivity than their less phenomenologically-inclined peers. Over the final two chapters, I substantiate this claim with reference to how Merleau-Ponty’s later ontological turn (which aims to mitigate this tension) proves a retrograde one in terms of the onto-epistemological humility which is most valuable about the ecophenomenological project.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Environmental Crisis

In August 2016, the expert Working Group of the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy (WGA) voted overwhelmingly in favour of formally recognising a new geological epoch called ‘the Anthropocene’ (Carrington, 2016). Their recommendation, the WGA said, was in acknowledgement of the profound and probably irreversible impact of human behaviours on geologically significant processes and conditions via intensive agriculture, urbanization, colonization, and so on. But this is not only a geological matter. The mass disruption of biogeochemical phenomena stems from the same anthropogenic causes that—partly because of those biogeochemical disruptions—continue to have profound effects on the more-than-human world at large. The supporting evidence typically cited by Anthropocene proponents makes for uncomfortable reading: significant anthropogenic climate change; widespread deforestation; ocean acidification and “spreading oceanic ‘dead zones’”; desertification; ecosystem collapse; biodiversity loss; mass species extinction; and “giant swirls of plastic debris about the size of Texas in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans” (Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, 2016; Crutzen, 2002, p.23; Steffen *et al*, 2007; Bennett, 2011, p.120).

I raise the issue of ‘the Anthropocene’, not because I wish to vouch in favour of adopting the term (I don’t, for reasons that will become apparent in chapter four), but because it provides a helpful illustration of two aspects of the state of affairs I wish to address. The first is that I take the evidence cited by Anthropocene proponents to be emblematic of an era of environmental crisis in which we find ourselves. Although they acknowledge that its roots run much deeper, the WGA tentatively dates the beginning of the Anthropocene at around 1945 with a “Great Acceleration” (Steffen *et al*, 2007, p.617) of greenhouse gas emissions, fossil fuel and water consumption, the volume of consumer waste deposits, and so on. Whilst awareness of ‘environmental issues’ has undeniably become part of common consciousness and public debate over the intervening years, however, this awareness hasn’t led to significant mitigation of the sorts of behaviours and attitudes responsible for the troubling phenomena noted above, the relative situations of which continue to worsen at an alarming rate. That is not to say that no improvements have been made. The regulation of chlorofluorocarbons, for instance, *has* significantly slowed anthropogenic ozone layer depletion. Neither increased awareness of ecological ‘issues’ nor the sort of regulatory approach employed to curb chlorofluorocarbon emissions has, however, resulted in the wholesale *attitudinal* changes necessary to disrupt the gamut of problematic behaviours at their root. In no significant way

does broad acknowledgement of our crisis situation seem to have unseated our wasteful consumer habits, for instance, nor has it obviously undermined the attraction of economic imperatives which demand a culture of ecologically unsustainable growth. As Paul Crutzen, the atmospheric chemist widely credited with coining the ‘Anthropocene’ term, puts it:

The Great Acceleration is reaching criticality. Enormous, immediate challenges confront humanity over the next few decades as it attempts to pass through a bottleneck of continued population growth, excessive resource use and environmental deterioration. [Nevertheless] in most parts of the world the demand for fossil fuels overwhelms the desire to reduce greenhouse emissions.

(Steffen *et al*, 2007, p.620)

Regardless of any further claims about its purportedly ‘epochal’ significance, then, if the evidence cited above is taken to be indicative of a more general state of affairs, it seems self-evident that the current state of relationships between humans and the more-than-human world is problematic in the extreme.

The second thing that the Anthropocene literature helpfully foregrounds is how we typically conceive of the environmental crisis as a multitude of ‘issues’ to be ‘solved’ by the right kind of practical behaviours. Crutzen (2011) does exactly this when he suggests that our present crisis emphasizes “the enormity of humanity’s responsibility as stewards of the Earth”; a role Crutzen thinks we can successfully satisfy if we “pioneer a modest, renewable, mindful, and less material lifestyle” (primarily by eating less meat and using public transport); increase funding for technoscience (particularly “bio-adaptive technologies”); and shift “from crusade to management, so that we can steer nature’s course symbiotically instead of enslaving the formerly natural world”. As the ecophenomenologist Ted Toadvine argues, however, by characterizing the debate *exclusively* in terms of an issue/solution schema, the more basic terms under which ‘environmental issues’ are themselves enframed (e.g. as matters of ‘excessive resource use’) aren’t really up for discussion (2009, p.3).

1.2 The Issue with ‘Issues’

One might be forgiven for thinking that the issue/solution schema doesn’t present much of a problem. If, as I’ve suggested above, we find ourselves in a *crisis* situation which requires our urgent attention, then one might think that (at least for the time being) we *should* focus exclusively on the right kinds of practical responses to environmental problems. But this would be a mistake for two reasons. Firstly, because, as Neil Evernden (1993, p.xi) suggests, understanding the environmental crisis as an *overwhelming* collection of ‘issues’ inhibits

sustained, engaged action in the wholesale manner seemingly required. Secondly, and more importantly, because the *urgency* of these calls to practical action also prevents us from recognising that ‘environmental issues’ are

simply the visible portion of a much larger entity, most of which lies beneath the surface, beyond our daily inspection. The submerged mass constitutes the fundamental ‘problem’, that domain of unspoken assumptions which legitimates, indeed even demands, the behaviour which precipitates the state of affairs we designate as ‘the environmental crisis’.

(Evernden, 1993, p.xii)

On Evernden’s account, by committing all our resources to tackling ‘environmental issues’ in our present piecemeal fashion, we’re doomed never to address the crisis itself, because some of its root causes remain unchallenged.

Like Evernden, I strongly suspect that our ongoing failure to address the behaviours and attitudes which precipitate our crisis situation stems largely from the ways that ‘environmental issues’ and subsequently plausible ‘solutions’ have hitherto been set up. If so, then any successful attempt to address our crisis situation appears to require at least some investigation of the basic terms of debate. What I want to suggest in this thesis is that one fruitful avenue of investigation is to address the violence already implicit in the dominant ways that we—primarily through adherence to the objectivistic onto-epistemological lens typical of the natural sciences—conceptualise more-than-human entities and our relationships to them. There can be no clear distinctions between violent behaviours and their accompanying perceptual or conceptual schemes, I will suggest, because any such distinctions will fail to appreciate that our theoretical pronouncements are already intimately related to our habitual relationships with the world we investigate. Any such distinctions thus rely on the possibility of neatly distinguishing theory from praxis, which I deny. Tackling our environmental crisis wholesale, I will argue, requires attention to the (meta-)theoretical apparatuses which licence the endemic behavioural violence we enact against the more-than-human world, because those apparatuses already do violence to that world through the limited ontological and epistemological terms they permit¹. Cashing out this claim requires much more work. I discuss it in more depth in chapters two, three, and four.

¹ I’m happy to court parallels with Slavoj Žižek’s views on violence. Žižek (2008, p.2) argues that there exists a “symbolic” and “systemic” violence which underpins visibly violent behaviours like the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but this sort of “violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent” (i.e. violence enacted by a discernible subject). Žižek also cautions against the urgent injunction to act to ‘rectify’ violent *actions*, because in doing so, we leave the background violence untouched.

Even setting aside my own specific contentions for the moment, given that our improving knowledge of environmental ‘issues’ hasn’t translated into radical engagement with them, Evernden’s suspicions have at least face value plausibility and are, therefore, worthy of investigation. Since attending to our ‘submerged mass’ appears to be a distinctly philosophical undertaking, one might think this task should fall to ‘environmental philosophy’. However, as a matter of historical accuracy, Toadvine (2009, p.4) notes that, at least in the Anglophone tradition, even environmental philosophy has generally neglected this important task and taken up the more superficial issue/solution schema instead. To understand why, one must appreciate that ‘philosophies of nature’ have a much longer history than environmental philosophy in its current guise, where it is primarily conceived as environmental *ethics*.

As Bruce Foltz and Robert Frodeman (2004, pp.2-3) note, ‘philosophies of nature’ enjoyed a long period of historical development, predominantly shaped by their teleological conceptions of the more-than-human world, prior to modernity when—no doubt partly because of the incredible predictive successes of the natural sciences—reductive, mechanistic, and value-free conceptions of the more-than-human world began to prevail. As Bruno Latour (1993) has influentially noted, the early modernist schemas of Bacon, Descartes, Newton, and Galileo, unlike many of their forebears, promised purification of separate realms of enquiry: an accessible world of wholly-knowable natural *objects*-in-themselves on the one hand and a separable world of interrogative *subjects* on the other.

As is well-known, Kant inaugurated a challenge to this pre-critical picture by problematizing any attempt to purify more-than-human reality of all epistemic relations to its human investigator. One way to understand the mistake that Kant diagnoses in pre-critical metaphysics is as follows: by failing to appreciate that one’s knowledge of ‘objects’ cannot be entirely uncoupled from the ‘subjective’ conceptual structures one’s mind imposes on them, the dogmatic metaphysician unwittingly incorporates the more-than-human world into his. He mistakes the *correlational* character of the world-*for-us* for the (allegedly otherwise unknowable) world-*in-itself*. As Foltz and Frodeman note, the confines of the Kantian schema therefore dictate that specifically *philosophical* reflections on the world’s character must be fundamentally introverted: limited to “‘formal’, transcendental reflection on the possibilities and operations of our positive knowledge of nature, with the ‘material’ or contentful knowledge of nature restricted to the safe harbours and placid waters of the natural sciences” (2004, p.2).

Although the post-Kantian picture differs radically in many respects from that which precedes it, one thing remains largely common to both: ontology and epistemology remain

relatively securely within the confines of the natural sciences. Any exploration of the ‘objective’ character of the more-than-human world is, therefore, limited largely by the same exclusionary scientific assumptions and apparatuses which delineate the character we’re able to discern in it. The main difference between the pre-critical dogmatists and the post-Kantian positivists merely concerns whether natural scientists can legitimately aim for correspondence between their findings and the ‘mind-independent’ world. Given the confines of the Kantian schema, the positivists, at least insofar as they consistently reject access to the ‘purified’ objects-in-themselves of the pre-critical schema, hold that they cannot.

Since environmental ethics emerged as a discipline in the 1970s against the backdrop of positivism, Toadvine argues, it was inevitable that it would retain the “Kantian division of theoretical from practical knowledge” (2009, p.5). Adherence to this division would explain why environmental ethics often continues to find itself limited to the issue/solution schema, concerning itself with “purely axiological questions” rather than “raising deeper and more radical questions about the philosophical assumptions underlying our scientific and political commitments” (2009, p.5). Even today, the basic terms which many environmental philosophers use to identify the objects of their concern, such as ‘ecosystem’ and ‘biodiversity’, are adopted relatively uncritically from ecological science and so, given the Kantian division of labour, significantly “predate a systematic philosophical exploration” (Foltz and Frodeman, 2004, p.4) of the philosophical and political commitments already implied by them. Perhaps more troublingly, because ontology continues to be afforded a certain deliberative priority over axiology, these natural scientific terms also appear to dictate the shape that ‘solutions’ (frequently understood as ‘moral obligations’) must take. This is exactly what we see happen in Crutzen’s case above: his third ‘solution’ explicitly draws its justification from the scientist Alexander von Humboldt’s ecological holism. For similar motives to Crutzen’s, the imperative to adopt ecologically symbiotic behaviours has become a popular sort of ‘solution’ in the environmental ethics literature².

I emphasize the development of environmental ethics within the post-Kantian context for several reasons, each of which will be important in setting up the terms of the present enquiry. The first is relatively straightforward. Following Evernden and Toadvine, I’ve suggested above that some philosophical interrogation of our basic assumptions and onto-epistemological apparatuses appears to be called for if we’re to establish the sort of wholesale engagement seemingly necessary to mitigate the behaviours responsible for our crisis

² See Callicott (1989) or Fox (1990). I explore some problems with Callicott’s eco-holism in chapter three.

situation. However, this (meta-)theoretical groundwork falls outside the usual axiological scope of environmental *ethics*.

Given their near monopoly on ontological and epistemological matters, any such task would apparently fall to the natural sciences. But it's hard to see how the natural sciences could carry out a sufficiently radical investigation of their own terms given the narrow confines of science's positivistic remit in the post-Kantian context under which "the modern enframing of nature results in a conception of nature consisting entirely of extensional properties related to one another within a causal matrix" (Brown, 2003, p.3). Simply put: any violence that such enframing may do to the more-than-human world isn't the sort of thing that can show up, and therefore be addressed, within a positivistic framework (Evernden, 1993, p.23). Furthermore, if, as I will argue, the way that we ordinarily take the more-than-human world to be *exhaustively* enframed by natural scientific terms is largely a persisting (but empirically invisible) *philosophical and political* relic of the problematic modernist schema championed by Descartes and Bacon, then science's background assumptions cannot uncritically constitute the boundary conditions of the sort of radical investigation I have in mind. It's clear to me that we need to adopt a critical approach to environmental philosophy and its orientation relative to natural science if we're to attend to the necessary groundwork in earnest. This is the main task I will attend to in this thesis.

1.3 Dogmatic Naturalism vs Correlationism

The above also helps to foreground some other important concerns that must be navigated by any critical environmental philosophy. One such concern relates to the relationships between realism, metaphysics, and critique.

Despite any reservations we might have about natural science's stronghold on epistemological and ontological matters, it should be relatively obvious *why* environmental philosophers have sought to retain a starring role for science: doing so helps to retain the requisite 'realism' in our philosophies to address the more-than-human world *itself*. Even Kant (1996, p.402/A370) famously ascribes an important role to 'empirical realism', according to which the 'objective' properties of existent worldly entities *really* can be known, if only as they are given a set of conceptual assumptions. Without commitment to some sort of metaphysically real world—which is pervasive in pre- and post-Kantian contexts—it's hard to see how one could be moved by the evidence cited at the outset. Why be concerned about the disappearing habitats of polar bears or pygmy three-toed sloths, for instance, unless one

thinks that there really are some such entities whose habitats are disappearing?³ But science does more than afford the bare possibility of ‘realism’. Science also provides environmental philosophy with increasingly sophisticated and fine-grained analyses that are *essential* to understand the real contours of our crisis situation (how else could we begin to grasp the harms done in destabilising forest ecosystems or phosphorus cycles, for example?) and some possible means of addressing it (most straightforwardly: via resource allocation models, and so on).

Nevertheless, respecting science’s valuable contributions cannot require wholesale commitment to any sort of dogmatic metaphysical naturalism under which the ontological reality uncovered by the natural sciences is taken to more-or-less straightforwardly correspond to the mind-independent world. This sort of position is problematic for reasons that we’ve already seen Kant identify. Kant suggests that dogmatic metaphysicians misrepresent more-than-human entities by projecting correlational epistemic properties—which are non-accidentally related to the kinds of perceivers that we are—*onto* the ‘thing-in-itself’. Theirs is more-or-less the same mistake identified by the influential biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1957). Uexküll suggests that even human organisms tend to mistake their *Umwelt* (or *environment*)—complete with biosemiotic signs specifically related to the biological capacities that sort of organism possesses—for the *Umgebung*, or (allegedly ‘noumenal’) reality *itself*⁴. Uexküll contends that for ticks, for example, space and time exist only relative to the chemical stimulus of butyric acid, which is straightforwardly absent from human *Umwelten*. Thus, the overall problem with taking natural science (suitably conceived: Descartes’ physics is not Bacon’s empiricism) to provide a straightforward window onto mind-independent reality is that it promises what Hilary Putnam calls “the metaphysical objectivity of the God’s Eye View” (1981, p.xi), but achieves it only by implicitly subsuming more-than-human reality under our own—markedly human—conceptual schemes⁵.

In one sense, by forcing us to address and problematize the conceptual sediment which infuses our accounts of reality, Kant’s Copernican Revolution in philosophy represents a huge improvement in our potential to reduce the ontological and epistemological violence we do to the more-than-human world. If our observations of phenomena are never passive, desituated, nor epistemically innocent, as Kant and his descendants suggest, then we should surely be

³ See James (2007, p.502).

⁴ Unlike Toadvine (2009) and Kohák (1984), I don’t eschew the term ‘environment’ because I want to retain resonances with Uexküll’s contentions about our active contributions to the world’s physiognomy.

⁵ Putnam contends that the “*externalist*” (1981, p.49) perspective is regrettably prevalent in contemporary analytic philosophy. Although Putnam’s contention doesn’t sit easily with my story about post-Kantian philosophy, it makes no difference to my wider argument. Putnam’s point is that contemporary philosophy is problematic where it retains the dogmatic metaphysician’s naïve correspondence theory of truth.

alive to our contributions to those phenomena in a manner that speaks against our violent appropriation of them. One might reasonably understand critical environmental theorists like the ecofeminists that we will encounter in chapter three to be engaged in a related project of critical self-reflexivity through their attempts to weed out some of the more problematic conceptual assumptions implicit in the ways that we typically enframe the more-than-human world. If, as ecofeminists suggest, the violence done in callous habitat depletion is intimately related to the violence done in ‘naturalizing’ *our* perspectives on it—perhaps even in characterizing rainforests *as* ‘depleted resources’, for instance—then it seems we must heed the Kantian imperative for critical self-reflexivity in any attempt to attend to our submerged mass.

In another sense, however, the introverted focus Kant forces in philosophy makes it difficult to see how philosophy isn’t left to sink, more worryingly, into what Quentin Meillassoux calls the “correlationist circle” (2008, p.5). In this circle, correlational terms like those identified by Kant are absolutized—at least in the epistemological sense—such that perceptual or conceptual access to the nonhuman things *themselves* becomes impossible. On the correlationist model (which we shall explore in chapter five), one effectively abandons any attempt to address the more-than-human-world on its own terms. The correlationist is, instead, led to make claims like the following: “‘Objects’ do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. *We* cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description” (Putnam, 1981, p.45). Under correlationism, the necessity of doing pervasive violence to the more-than-human world through imposition of our conceptual schemes becomes something we simply (although perhaps begrudgingly) accept.

Note that one reason Putnam speaks of *multiple* schemes of description is in recognition of the multitude of correlational intermediaries between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ that have been explored since Kant. For Foucault or Butler, this might be ideological discourse; for Wittgenstein, Putnam, or Derrida, this might be language, and so on. But what is common to all correlationist philosophies, according to Meillassoux, is their totalitarianism. By moving from a reality carved-up by “a Mythical mind” (in Kant) to multiple “social” accounts of correlational mediation (post-Kant), Latour argues that investigative epistemic subjects remain “locked not only into the prison of their own categories, but into that of their social groups as well” (1999, pp.6-7). From this limited purview, which the environmental philosophers Steven Vogel (2002) and William Cronon (1996) might be taken to be key proponents of, “nature” (understood as shorthand for ‘nonhuman reality’) ends up being a “profoundly human construction” (Cronon, 1996, p.25). This is because, whilst neither Cronon nor Vogel deny the existence of a metaphysically real world beyond our practical

involvements with it, they nevertheless deny any possibility of access to it independently of mediation by reified human concepts (including ‘nature’ and ‘environment’), culture, practices, and so on (Vogel, 2002, pp.29-32).

So, why is this significant for our present task? I’ve suggested that one underlying cause of the environmental crisis is our imposition of certain kinds of ontological and epistemological schema onto the more-than-human world. It’s at least plausible, and therefore worthy of investigation, that the behavioural violence enacted in aggressive deforestation for palm oil cultivation, for instance, is non-accidentally related to the violence done at a metatheoretical level through the ways we conceptualise the basic terms of debate. If the bounds of the correlationist circle are as inescapable as they appear, however, then we face the problem that the interrogative human ‘subject’ is *cleaved* from the nonhuman ‘objects’ of their concern (rainforests, orangutans, biodiversity, etc.) and so any attempt to address these entities *themselves* appears to be futile⁶. If environmental philosophy is doomed to forever conceptualise—or, as Cronon and Vogel would have it, *construct*—nonhuman ‘objects’ from within our increasingly narrow, anthropocentric prisons, then any hope of addressing the more-than-human world on its own, rich, terms appears to be lost.

Of course, even from within a correlationist or constructivist remit, environmental philosophy isn’t without merit. It can remain self-reflexive about its political and philosophical commitments in the praiseworthy sense that interpretive schemas and practices which “acknowledge their own social and transformative character, are to be preferred... over those that do not” (Vogel, 2002, p.35). But, if all epistemic access to the more-than-human world is socially constructed, then philosophy’s acknowledgement of its inherent anthropocentrism or anthropomorphism is as far as it can stretch in its commitment to mitigate onto-epistemological violence. Environmental theory would remain irredeemably anthropocentric in the potentially dangerous sense that, even in critique, theory couldn’t penetrate the correlational (e.g. ideological or cultural) terms under which we allegedly construct nature in the first place. There could be no possibility of correction from *outside* the correlationist circle. Thus, if the more fundamental sort of violence we’re investigating can be understood, in part, as the failure or refusal to engage with the more-than-human world on its own terms—this is, after all, what the intuitive attraction of naturalistic realism in the environmental context suggests—then correlationists and constructivists are set against addressing this sort of violence *even in principle*.

⁶ Toadvine (2009) makes some related points about the requirement to navigate the demands of metaphysical realism and idealism in any tenable ‘philosophy of nature’.

Some go further. Timothy Morton, for instance, claims that if ‘objectivity’ is reduced to “*objectivity for us*”—where ‘us’ denotes human beings, as Putnam concedes—then environmental theory is irredeemably geared *towards* violence against nonhuman entities (Morton, 2011; Putnam, 1981, p.55). Morton makes this charge for similar reasons to Uexküll: because in the correlationist circle—even *in acts of critique*—nonhuman ‘things’ only ever show up *for us* insofar as they relate to *our* (anthropocentric) interests as manifested in human concepts and language. Even if one finds Morton’s claim too strong, by effectively reducing nonhuman entities to our ‘subjective’ representations or constructions of them, correlationism nevertheless appears to introvert critical environmental philosophy in a manner that is relatively straightforwardly incompatible with more-than-human *alterity*. If the cost of taking seriously our active contribution to the objects of our concern is that we ultimately legitimate widespread conceptual violence against them then, given our current project, the cost is surely too much.

The preceding discussion is too coarsely grained to do justice to the issues and approaches it touches on. I will revisit some of them in what follows. Nevertheless, regardless of its simplicity, the above should serve useful to position the argument that will be advanced in this thesis. To summarise:

1. Philosophers must investigate the terms under which the environmental crisis is currently enframed if we’re to address it in earnest.
2. This task requires critical assessment of the assumptions, apparatuses, and commitments involved in the natural scientific ontologies and epistemologies which underpin our understanding of environmental ‘issues’.
3. Since this critical assessment is a distinctly philosophical undertaking, the remit of environmental philosophy must also be a critical one.
4. Critical environmental philosophy also needs to avoid the pitfalls of dogmatic naturalism and correlationism, each of which risks doing undue violence to the more-than-human world by either implicitly or explicitly subsuming it under anthropocentric terms (i.e. as it shows up for us only relative to *our* concerns, concepts, power relations, language, and so on.).

1.4 An Ecophenomenological Alternative

In what follows, I will employ *ecophenomenological* tools to attend to the task outlined above. Resituating environmental philosophy in the ecophenomenological vein licenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work, I will argue, allows it to resist uncritically adopting reductive naturalist ontologies and epistemologies. Moreover, this sort of ecophenomenology may also chart the

requisite course between dogmatic realism and correlationism to address the more-than-human world on its own, rich, terms. Note, however that I say, ‘*licenced* by Merleau-Ponty’s work’. His later ontological turn notwithstanding, I think that the ecophenomenological approach advocated in this thesis chimes with Merleau-Ponty’s most important philosophical commitments. Nevertheless, I’m more interested in whether the approach I advance may help to disrupt the violence of our submerged mass than whether mine is an entirely faithful rendition of Merleau-Ponty’s own philosophy. I will, therefore, hereafter refer to it as being ‘Merleau-Pontian’.

According to the Merleau-Pontian model I advocate, our respective pitfalls may be avoided via attention to the epistemic salience of one’s *embodiment* to the world one inhabits⁷. A reconstruction of my basic argument is as follows: since all ontology and epistemology is derived from a perceptual horizon which, given the fundamental subject-object ambiguity of one’s embodiment, admits of ‘subject’ or ‘object’ poles only as secondary abstractions, then—contrary to Latour’s (1993, pp.8-9) accusations—the ecophenomenologist may reject the fundamental terms of the modernist schema. Doing so means that the Merleau-Pontian isn’t left with a choice between dogmatic naturalistic objectivity and correlational objectivity-for-us (whether conceived naturalistically or otherwise). Why? Because, as embodied, one is ontologically continuous with the more-than-human world investigated and so isn’t precluded from unmediated access to it in the manner of the correlationist ‘*subject*’ (versus correlationism). But also because ecophenomenologists deny that accessing the more-than-human world on its own terms requires recourse to ‘mind-independent *objects*’—the sloth, polar bear, or forest ecosystem as they are ‘in-themselves’—devoid of any conceptual sediment or active structuring on our part (versus dogmatic naturalism).

To elaborate, it’s important to realise that both dogmatic naturalist and correlationist alternatives “share a common assumption, namely, that nature in its own right lacks a sense or meaning that is open to human understanding” (Toadvine, 2009, p.15). The former generally denies that ‘meaning’ exists as a basic facet of the nonhuman world because it cannot

⁷ Although I cannot expand on this thought in depth here, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology enjoys advantages over other (e.g. Heideggerian or Husserlian) (eco-)phenomenological traditions by focusing on the irreducible contribution of the *specifics* of one’s embodiment to the world’s physiognomy. Heideggerian “Daseinanalysis”, for instance, is frequently criticised for underplaying the *ontological* significance of bodily specificities, which Heidegger generally sees as “contingent and accidental configurations without transcendental relevance” (Heinämaa, forthcoming; Sartre, 1969, pp.382-3). Insofar as he retains a transcendental phenomenology, as we shall see in chapter six, Husserl displays a related hostility to the intentional heterogeneity plausibly enjoyed by differently embodied entities; a failing which his supporters are apt to inherit. The later Husserl only began to address this shortcoming by embracing a remarkably similar phenomenological project to Merleau-Ponty’s (see *PP*, pp.vii-xiv). I say more about the merits of Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology over other schools of critical environmental theory in section 1.6.

obviously be identified as a positive property-in-itself. The latter at least denies that nonhuman entities have meanings of their own that can be made available to *us* outside of our various conceptual schemes. This is one key reason why, for Kant and many of his environmentally-minded descendants (e.g. Wilson, 1998), recognition of the correlation doesn't disrupt the naturalistic stronghold on ontology and epistemology, but rather results in resituating science positivistically. In making the claims they do, however, both dogmatic naturalist and correlationist alternatives tend to licence only a limited and plastic model of the more-than-human world. Both also risk making meaning, culture, and agency the preserve of *human* subjects in a suspiciously anthropocentric manner.

For the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist, however, truth or reality is expressed ambiguously *between* body-subject and world, and so the more-than-human world can express its own, rich, meanings with, or through, human body-subjects. The Merleau-Pontian can, therefore, resist fundamental commitment to the reductive ontological and epistemological terms of naturalism. Moreover, expressive truth becomes possible by rejecting the modernist separation of subject from object. There is, therefore, no need for the Merleau-Pontian to speak of 'filtration' of one pole to the other and so any charge of anthropocentrism derived from the apparent necessity of correlational mediation will also be overdrawn. Importantly, however, dissolving a difference in kind doesn't collapse all differences and make the body-subject and more-than-human world *the same thing*. Epistemic contact with the more-than-human world itself doesn't, therefore, grant the Merleau-Pontian infallible acquaintance with the world's meanings. Neither is the Merleau-Pontian committed to claiming that *theirs* are the only meanings truly available for expression. Thus, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology finds a meaningful place for both robust *critical self-reflexivity* (as is demanded post-Kant), and radical *openness* to the more-than-human world on its own, rich, terms (embracing a realism seemingly impossible post-Kant).

Since satisfying both demands appears to be essential for a positive and interrogative rethinking of the entities that environmental philosophers address, then it should be clear why Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology provides a useful toolkit for our present task. Much more must be said about all of this, however, if a convincing case is to be made for asking philosophers to reconceive the environmental crisis ecophenomenologically. Since providing the details of this case is the task of the present thesis, however, I shall resist the urge to do so here. I shall instead signpost the main contours of my argument via an outline of the chapters that follow.

1.5 Chapter Outline

One main task of chapters two and three is to explore what's so problematic about our default naturalism in ontological and epistemological matters. In chapter two, I draw principally from Merleau-Ponty's arguments in *The Structure of Behaviour* and *Phenomenology of Perception* to argue that, by granting ontological status only to a realm of positive objects-in-themselves (including reified relations, such as ecosystems or carbon cycles in-themselves), naturalism neglects the diacritical relations that provide the necessary perceptual background for those 'objects' to present themselves with the character they do⁸. By neglecting these diacritical relations, the *objectivistic* remit of natural science affords an extremely limited and phenomenologically suspect model of the more-than-human world. Since, I argue, the ultimate basis for ontology and epistemology lies in our phenomenological openings onto the world, the latter charge undermines the assumed philosophical legitimacy of "objective thought" (*PP*, p.71) which underpins naturalism. Moreover, since 'objective thought' deals solely in reflective abstractions, it also risks distorting the character of the phenomena that natural scientists seek to address. If, as I suggested above, natural science cannot itself attend to these failings, then a "return to the [more-than-human] things themselves is from the start a fore swearing of science" (*PP*, p.viii).

I then outline the main features of a Merleau-Pontian alternative which takes seriously that one's ordinary modes of bodily comportment in the world form part of the diacritical background which affords the basic meanings that the more-than-human world permits. Since it is also only *as* one's body that one may *grasp* the world's own meanings, one's body also affords unmediated contact with that world, complete with a richer and more profound set of meanings (plausibly including axiological meanings) than might otherwise be accommodated in an objectivistic schema. Nevertheless, since Merleau-Ponty argues that the meanings the world affords at the level of consciousness are reliant on a pre-conscious 'body schema' which is subject to habitual sediment, the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist must remain radically-reflective about her own sedimented intentional (e.g. ideological, political, and economic) commitments. Failure to recognise our intentional contributions to the world's physiognomy is part of the reason why, I will suggest, even as environmental philosophers, we often unwittingly enframe the more-than-human world under the implicitly instrumentalist terms of technoscience.

⁸ By 'diacritical relationships' I mean the various interrelationships between (otherwise indeterminate) aspects of one's perceptual field which serve to co-determine the qualities of the intentional objects that ultimately show up in perception. I say more about these in the following chapter.

Understood in the Merleau-Pontian context I suggest, the overall problem in trying to discern the world's *true* ontological character is that body-subjects are embedded within the world they investigate, and so one cannot enact the sort of transcendent or transcendental⁹ reflection which naturalism—as a form of objective thought—appears to require. The major lesson here is that, for the Merleau-Pontian, the error involved in our objectivistic appropriation of the more-than-human world is more-than-cognitive; it is one of *praxis*. It pertains to our basic, *bodily*, ways of navigating, utilising, and relating to the more-than-human world; ways which are always, in part, the product of historico-cultural sediment. Since a full transcendent or transcendental reduction is impossible, this means that an appropriate approach to *addressing* problematic accounts of that world must be one of radically-reflective praxis. Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology contributes to our renewed investigation of the more-than-human world by setting itself up, more-or-less, *as* a certain kind of critical social praxis. The critical self-reflexivity involved in such a praxis is related to that which is of merit in Vogel's account. Unlike Vogel, however, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology has the benefit of being able to understand 'seeing better' partly in terms of the accuracy with which one expresses the meanings truly made available for expression by the more-than-human world *itself*.

In chapter three, I explore the powerful contributions that ecofeminism offers to ecophenomenology by providing a better account of some of the problematic *political* sediment of our submerged mass. Val Plumwood's ecofeminism, I argue, contributes to our capacity for radical reflection by highlighting that objectivistic schemas (like the ones commonly advanced by natural scientists) rely on a *colonial* logic. The issue here isn't only that subject and object are misleadingly set apart in kind, but that their separation is also partly the result of a *value* dualism, according to which 'objects' are hierarchically inferior to 'subjects'. Thus, Plumwood allows us to see that if we're to address our environmental crisis then we must disrupt the implicitly dualistic terms under which natural science operates because these are set *violently* against fair, non-hierarchical, and non-exploitative engagement with nonhuman entities (and other Others) from the outset.

Whilst Plumwood's basic argument is a compelling one, I argue that its salient features should be reconfigured ecophenomenologically. The main reason for this recommendation is because, by situating her approach within a naturalistic remit, Plumwood ends up courting a curious disembodiment within theory. By failing to fully appreciate the intentional salience of

⁹ I associate the former with the 'externalist' sense of transcendence which Putnam links to a God's Eye View. The latter implies a Kantian or Husserlian sense of transcendence, under which, roughly speaking, one purifies conscious experience of all 'inessential' conceptual components (e.g. by bracketing the contribution of one's political allegiances, if not those of space and time, etc.).

embodiment Plumwood leaves herself insufficiently open to the radical sort of alterity that may imbue the ways that nonhuman animals, for instance, may differentially experience the world's meanings. Furthermore, by failing to appreciate the extent to which dualistic logic saturates the background of our ontological predispositions, Plumwood is also led to misconstrue how best to unseat dualistic praxis.

In chapter four, I take up the (primarily critical) insights of the previous chapters to explore how Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology, suitably bolstered with ecofeminist and new materialist insights, might help us to perceive the more-than-human world *better*. I do this primarily by considering some provisional ways in which the sort of praxis I defend might foreground subject/object, mind/nature, and mind/body continuities as correctives to the illicit dualism of our default naturalism. I argue that naturalism's objectivistic assumptions render it incompatible with recent insights about, for example, the intentional meanings plausibly expressed by beetles and forests, and the quasi-agency possessed by waste plastic. These incompatibilities force us to recognise that the epistemological and ontological commitments involved in taking the 'objects' enframed by naturalism to exhaust the world—and, therefore, form *the* basis of our understanding of the 'environmental crisis'—conceal a drive to mastery as part of their diacritical background. This is because they largely neglect the partial openings from which they are derived and the intentional commitments (e.g. the 'masculine' political impetus to reduce more-than-human entities *to* resources) which infuse the background terms of engagement.

Engaging with the more-than-human world on its own terms, I argue, requires a philosophy equipped to recognise the mindlike properties that entities may legitimately possess. But it also requires recognising that the metaphysical presupposition of a wholly-knowable realm of objects-in-themselves (whether dogmatic or positivistic) is unfit for its task. This is because the more-than-human world cannot be unproblematically reduced to a collection of determinate 'objects' or properties-in-themselves. But it is also because interrogative epistemic 'subjects' cannot be purified of the multitude of ostensibly 'objective' properties which delineate the intentional character of the objects they grasp. Not only is this because things show up for us relative to the specific demands of our motor intentions (as Merleau-Ponty shows), but also because (as Jane Bennett argues) we cannot purify epistemic 'subjects' of the contribution provided by the foods they consume, and so on.

Philosophy needs to acknowledge that ontologies and epistemologies are non-accidentally related to the irreducibly embodied modes of engagement under which they are taken up. I therefore follow Merleau-Ponty in departing from reductive naturalism and propose a new

onto-epistemological norm: the ‘view-from-everywhere’ which, as the sum of true expressions of the world, may encompass the intentional meanings that may be expressed by divergent more-than-human entities. Taking up a view-from-everywhere, I argue, allows us to appreciate that entities can be taken up under multiple legitimate schemes of description which do not individually exhaust the meanings truly available for expression (some of which, given our limited kinds of embodied openings, will be beyond our ken). The descriptions that atmospheric chemists offer us about carbon dioxide emissions, for example, may be *true*, but only granted certain regional concessions and cannot, therefore, exhaust the phenomena they describe. By embracing the more positive onto-epistemological norm that is required by ecophenomenological analysis, I argue, we stand a better chance of addressing the submerged mass of our environmental crisis. This is because the norm I suggest is geared away from doing undue violence to more-than-human alterity from the outset. It cannot, after all, require us to *reduce* a forest to ‘carbon deposits’, an ‘ecosystem’, or a set of ‘ecosystem services’. I end the chapter by discussing how we might resist objectifying habits by inculcating a praxis of radical reflection.

If chapters two to four are broadly focused on Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology’s rejection of naturalism, then chapters five to seven concern its rejection of correlationism. In chapter five, I address the claim that even a radically-reflective ecophenomenology is incompatible with addressing the more-than-human world *itself* in the manner required by a view-from-everywhere. Proponents of this charge hold that, because it subsumes more-than-human entities into a human intentional horizon, phenomenology is paradigmatically correlationist in a problematically anthropocentric sense. I dispute this claim for reasons already mooted. Firstly, for the Merleau-Pontian at least, one is never straightforwardly a human ‘subject’ cleaved from the world-in-itself in the requisite manner for any serious correlationist charge to hold. Secondly, the critical remit of Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology *better* equips it to resist imposing conceptual violence onto the more-than-human world than its allegedly anticorrelationist rivals. Thus, I argue, there is no in-principle incompatibility between my praxis and the project I set for it.

In chapter six I discuss a narrower version of the correlationist charge which holds that, although there may be no in-principle contradiction between ecophenomenology and a nonanthropocentric rethinking of our ontological and epistemological assumptions, ecophenomenology is problematically predisposed to colonialism via its inherent *androcentrism*. This issue arises for similar reasons to the ones explored by Plumwood: in patriarchal or dualistic societies, our conceptual and perceptual schemes are dominated by problematic discursive norms which don’t present themselves straightforwardly to

consciousness. The main charge here is that phenomenology is prone to mistake its androcentric intentional heritage (e.g. by making objectification a transcendental condition of experience in Husserl's case) for the expression of the world's nondiscursive meanings; an error that, because of its introverted focus on lived-experience, ecophenomenology appears poorly equipped to uncover. Whilst it is true, I argue, that the Merleau-Pontian does need to engage with the more-than-human world on its own nondiscursive grounds, it is false to think that reflectively uncovering these grounds is a solitary endeavour. Rather, it is the recognition of the tensions between one's transcendence and immanence which ultimately opens the Merleau-Pontian to fruitful *intersubjective* means of correction as a matter of course. Thus, ecophenomenology's potential for *nonandrocentrism*, like its capacity for *nonanthropocentrism*, derives from its rejection of the terms of the modernist schema and its subsequent recognition that a full transcendent or transcendental reduction is unobtainable.

Nevertheless, it might be objected that our view-from-everywhere doesn't seem to be straightforwardly amenable to correction by nonhuman entities *themselves*, and so ecophenomenology harbours a residual tendency towards anthropocentrism. In chapter seven, I discuss Merleau-Ponty's later ontological turn which has the potential to address this sort of issue by making all expressions constitutive of the world's own flesh. I argue, however, that any subject-object reversibility licenced by the flesh is dialectically uninformative and serves to hamper the critical self-reflexivity which provides much of ecophenomenology's merit. One reason for its failings is that the appeal to the flesh requires a fundamental flattening of ontology which ends up obscuring or naturalizing the specific terms of the phenomenological opening under which it was flattened. Thus, appeals to the flesh threaten openness to alterity by making the Other's unfamiliarity too familiar in a manner also seen in speculative realist metaphysics, and not entirely alien to the one seen in objective thought.

In chapter eight, I draw the strands of my argument together. One might be disappointed by the failure of a turn to the flesh because it leaves ecophenomenology in the apparently paradoxical position of conceding its own anthropocentrism whilst also claiming that its value lies in facilitating less anthropocentric accounts of the more-than-human world than its objectivistic counterparts. Nevertheless, I think that the Merleau-Pontian can overcome the apparent performative contradiction involved. This is because, as I have already suggested, as a body-subject, one is never only, nor entirely, 'human' in the requisite manner for one's own weak anthropocentrism to preclude access to the meanings expressed by Others with whom one is connatural. Furthermore, by accepting the partiality of one's opening onto the world's meanings, one refuses to level down the Other's alterity in the manner one risks by taking up a fundamental ontology. Thus, it is in taking seriously one's asymmetric, or *chiasmic*, opening

onto the more-than-human world (and Others therein) that the Merleau-Pontian may chart the requisite course between critical self-reflexivity *and* openness to alterity to resist violently appropriating the more-than-human world as a matter of habit¹⁰.

1.6 Scope

I want to end by saying a few words about the scope of my project. On the one hand, the task I assign myself is an ambitious one: to promote an ecophenomenological rethinking of the ways that we understand and relate to the more-than-human world. On the other hand, however, my project is relatively modest. The sort of metatheoretical groundwork I have in mind, for instance, isn't even a completely novel one. Related projects have already been attempted, with mixed results, by critical environmental theorists including deep ecologists (e.g. Arne Naess; Warwick Fox), social ecologists (e.g. Murray Bookchin), ecofeminists (e.g. Val Plumwood; Carolyn Merchant), and ecophenomenologists, some of whom I have drawn upon at length in this introduction (e.g. Ted Toadvine; Bryan Bannon; Neil Evernden; David Abram). Whilst I cannot address each of their approaches individually, it might be useful to say something about why I think this kind of Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is better equipped for the task in hand than other kinds of critical environmental theory.

Existing ecophenomenological approaches foreground one common shortcoming amongst critical environmental theorists insofar as they often fail to engage sufficiently with the critical insights provided by (eco-)feminist analyses and so tend to overplay our openness to (more-than-human) alterity. As I will later attempt to show with reference to alternative Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologies, this is often because they misconstrue the extent of epistemic openness facilitated by one's embodiment. Social ecologists like Bookchin make a related error by "[e]ffectively subsuming nature under mind" (Cook, 2011, p.135) in the Hegelian sense. As we shall see, ecofeminist approaches exemplify another common shortcoming insofar as they often fail to address the epistemic salience of one's embodiment and so are apt to either overwrite alterity by situating their approaches naturalistically, or else court a problematic kind of correlationism. Similarly, deep ecologists (e.g. Callicott, 1989; Fox, 1990), for their part, often base their critiques of mainstream environmental philosophy on data appropriated relatively uncritically from ecological sciences. I contend that the approach I promote strikes a better balance between openness and critical self-reflexivity for the task in hand than the available alternatives.

¹⁰ A chiasmic relationship is one of partial encroachment. I explore the concept further in the next chapter.

My project is also modest in terms of the things it simply doesn't set out to do. Whilst my arguments for taking up a radically-reflective ecophenomenological praxis may seem plausible if one thinks that we should address our problematic relationships with the more-than-human world at root, I will not supply any meta-ethical arguments which would tie the reader into an obligation to care about instilling more positive relationships, or about seeing the world on its own terms. Like Edward Casey, I take it that "[a]n ethics of the environment must begin with the sheer and simple fact of being struck by something wrong happening in the environment" (2001, p.2). There seem, at least to my mind, to be meanings available for expression *in* the melting ice caps and polluted oceans which provide their own irreducibly phenomenological reasons to do something about them. At least as a provisional hypothesis, this seems to me to be unavoidably true, but my contentions may not stir the unflinching technocrat who insists they can see no such thing and so refuses to engage with even the basic demands of my project.

I also don't consider it to be within the scope of this thesis to address in detail which maxims or normative principles might be legitimately drawn from the sort of praxis I espouse. This isn't because I think that no such guidance could arise out of the metatheoretical groundwork I undertake, but rather because, as a situated theorist myself, I need to take that situation sufficiently seriously. Whilst I think meaningful work can be done in an ecophenomenological context concerning practice-focused means of addressing anthropogenic climate change, food scarcity, biodiversity loss, renewable energies, and so on, any such work must be subject to an intersubjective hyper-dialectic which takes seriously the fecundities between relevant disciplines (few, if any, of which I have been party to). Advancing an ethic or policy framework is simply not the sort of task one can plausibly achieve from one's armchair.

Nevertheless, these admissions don't make the work I'm doing so modest as to be trivial. As I suggested above, my aim in this thesis is to do some of the essential groundwork for us to attend to the 'submerged mass' of our environmental crisis. Thus, even though this sort of groundwork may, at times, appear so abstract as to be removed from the sphere of practical activism, its value goes beyond any supposed environmental theory/practice distinction. Although I'm wary of his wider ontological and epistemological commitments, J. Baird Callicott is worth quoting at length on why this is the case:

All environmentalists should be activists, but activism can take a variety of forms. The way that environmental philosophers can be the most effective environmental activists is by doing environmental philosophy. Of course, not everyone can be or wants or needs to be an environmental philosopher. Those who are not can undertake direct environmental action in other ways. My point is that environmental philosophers should not feel compelled to stop

thinking, talking, and writing about environmental ethics, and go *do* something about it instead—because talk is cheap and action is dear. In thinking, talking, and writing about environmental ethics, environmental philosophers already have their shoulders to the wheel, helping to reconfigure the prevailing cultural worldview and thus helping to push general practice in the direction of environmental responsibility.

(1999, p.43)

Chapter 2: Perception and Unrest

Man [sic], as opposed to a pebble which is what it is, is defined as a place of unrest (*Unruhe*), a constant effort to get back to himself, and consequently by his refusal to limit himself to one or another of his determinations.

(*SNS*, pp.55-6)

In my introduction, I mooted reasons for environmental philosophers to be wary of uncritically adopting the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the natural sciences. In this chapter, I lay the foundations for an ecophenomenological interrogation of the ‘submerged mass’ of our crisis situation. I do so by first identifying and problematizing some of the objectivistic prejudices that pervade science’s underpinning naturalistic metaphysics. Drawing principally from Merleau-Ponty’s earlier work, I argue that the sort of ‘objective thought’ which underpins naturalism is primarily concerned with reflective abstractions rather than experientially-given phenomena. Whilst this admission needn’t be problematic *per se*, I follow Merleau-Ponty in suggesting that naturalism’s basic ontological and epistemological stipulations misconstrue the phenomena on which they are based¹¹. The overall problem Merleau-Ponty identifies with objective thought is that it conflates the determinate Gestalt-objects which perception concludes in, with the basic constituents of ontological reality. Over the next three chapters I want to take Merleau-Ponty’s argument a step further by suggesting that some of the problematic ways we enframe more-than-human entities under the influence of naturalism can be traced back to the mistaken reification of ‘objects’ on which naturalism is based. This chapter will provide the basic resources for doing so.

This chapter’s central contention is that any attempt to address more-than-human entities on their own terms must take seriously the co-constitutive perceptual horizons through which they are always uncovered. Any such attempt must suspend foundational commitment to naturalism’s objectivistic assumptions and attempt to go “back to the things themselves”

¹¹ I’ve mentioned three terms it might be helpful to disambiguate. I take ‘naturalism’ to be a metaphysical position which eschews ‘supernatural’ properties and so limits ontological and epistemological enquiry to the modality of the in-itself; ordinarily, as described by (an ideal) natural science. ‘Objective thought’ is more fundamentally a theory of perception which takes its basic constituents to be determinate objects or properties. These terms are intimately related. We shall see that naturalistic metaphysics appears to derive, in part, from a misplaced adherence to objective thought. The third term—‘natural science’—refers to a range of disciplines which aim to provide the means of exhaustively describing or explaining ‘nature-in-itself’ (variously conceived). Although there is no in-principle reason why natural science must make substantive ontological pronouncements, natural science usually serves to inform or describe the basic metaphysical structures on which it already, to some degree, implicitly relies. Given their multi-directional transfer of influence, it is difficult (and perhaps disingenuous) to consistently separate natural science from naturalism more broadly.

(Husserl, 2001, p.168). I argue that progress in this project can best be facilitated through the medium of what Merleau-Ponty calls “radical reflection” (*PP*, p.xiv)—a sort of second-level reflection on the interplay between pre-reflective and reflective consciousnesses—when trying to glean the perceptual reality that underwrites our reflective accounts of the more-than-human world. Radical reflection may also help to foreground some of the background assumptions and apparatuses required for a situated body-subject to grasp a given more-than-human ‘object’ as they do. Radical reflection may also thereby help to shed some light on our ‘submerged mass’ by highlighting where our objectivistic *misconceptions* or *unwarranted* assumptions might licence behavioural violence against any more-than-human entities subsequently uncovered.

Although, given one’s intractable inherence within the world investigated, Merleau-Ponty is surely right to claim that the process of radical reflection is incomplete, I argue that recognition of this ‘failure’ is key to better engagement with the more-than-human world. This is because, since a fully transcendent or transcendental account is impossible, the committed Merleau-Pontian is tied to perpetual radical reflection as a matter of praxis. The Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist may, therefore, retain the robust sort of critical self-reflexivity that is demanded following Kant’s recognition of the correlation, without needing to take up the objectivistic baggage which motivates the Kantian “dialectic of the epistemological subject and the scientific object” and which, I’ve suggested, results in unhelpfully “making subject and object into inseparable correlatives” (*SB*, p.199; p.201).

2.1 Objective Thought

I begin with Merleau-Ponty’s critique of ‘objective thought’ thought—so-called because of the allegedly foundational ‘objects’ it relies upon—latent in both dominant philosophical accounts of perception: empiricism and intellectualism¹². Although it might seem strange to begin a critique of naturalism by critically appraising of models of perception, Merleau-Ponty provides reason to believe that an insular dialectic exists between the misleading accounts of perception relied upon by natural scientists and the ontological and epistemological claims they tend to make. Given that our overriding concern is to address the assumptions and commitments which delineate natural scientific characterizations of the more-than-human world, I will focus on Merleau-Ponty’s critique of empiricism. I do so because the ontological and epistemological terms that environmental philosophers inherit derive largely from natural

¹² Some (e.g. enactivist) approaches don’t formally subscribe to either paradigm. I touch upon the objectivistic residue in these accounts in chapter seven.

sciences (e.g. ecological science, atmospheric chemistry, or evolutionary biology) which are broadly empirical in method.

2.1.1 Empiricism

Merleau-Ponty's critique of empiricism focuses on its mistaken reliance on 'sensations' as the constituent atoms of perception. By 'sensation', Merleau-Ponty means what we might now call qualia: discrete, non-intentional, internal phenomena, from which perceptual experience is purportedly constructed. On the empirical account, for instance, in perceiving a telephone box, an epistemic subject is more-or-less directly acquainted with the self-contained sensation of 'redness' in consciousness. But sensations aren't limited to such simple scenarios. Sensations (or some other kind of 'pure impression') are also ordinarily taken to be the ultimate source of the atmospheric chemist's empirical observations about carbon dioxide emissions, for instance, albeit via specialized measuring apparatuses and subsequently contextualised within a complex theoretical framework. This is because, as Thomas Kuhn reminds us, when attempting to discern the world's basic ontological character, even the "scientist can have no recourse above or beyond what he sees with his eyes and instruments" (1970, p.114).

Despite our 'common-sense' conviction in sensations, however, Merleau-Ponty argues that we experience no such phenomena. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty argues, since we treat sensations as the fundamental constituents of perception, "[o]nce introduced, the notion of sensation distorts any analysis of perception" (*PP*, p.13). Moreover, if the empirical account of perception is as intimately related to naturalistic metaphysics as Merleau-Ponty suggests, any subsequent ontological and epistemological stipulations which rely on it will be similarly distorted.

Reflection on our perceptual experiences suggests that we aren't directly acquainted with any such *discrete* phenomena, with *constant and self-contained* qualities because perceptual qualities are always determined in virtue of the diacritical relationships they enjoy as part of a perceptual field. Even a simple white patch, Merleau-Ponty argues, possesses qualities such as its 'brightness' and 'shape' only relative to (e.g. the perceived colour of) its particular background, which also co-determines areas 'belonging' to the patch, and so on (*PP*, pp.3-4). This diacritical co-determinacy is perhaps most obvious in optical 'illusions'. In Edward Adelson's (1995) 'Checkershadow Illusion', for instance, the background of squares *A* and *B* (*B* 'belongs' to the lighter-coloured squares 'on' the checkerboard, but is also 'overshadowed' by a cylinder) means that we perceive *B* to be lighter than *A*. Once the checkerboard, cylinder, and shadow are bracketed out by a uniform grey box, however, *A* and *B* present themselves as

the same shade. The self-sufficiency of sensations is further undermined through Merleau-Ponty's observation that "synaesthetic perception the rule" (*PP*, p.229); a carpet lacks the same redness, Merleau-Ponty argues, if found not to be woolly to the touch. Further examples are commonplace in our experience and, tellingly, the language we use to describe those perceptions *more accurately*: the wet green of a spring lawn or the cold grey of steel, for instance.

Merleau-Ponty's point here is that empirical appeals to sensation misunderstand how perceptual objects are constituted. If sensations were "fully developed and determinate", as the empiricist suggests, at any given moment one should expect to experience a "*field of vision*":

a segment of the world precisely delimited, surrounded by a zone of blackness, packed full of qualities with no interval between them, held together by definite relationships of size similar to those lying on the retina.

(*PP*, pp.4-5)

One doesn't, Merleau-Ponty contends, because experience is always of a unified "perceptual domain" in which individual perceptual objects are always charged with irreducible *meanings* co-determined by the relationships they share within the whole "phenomenal field" (*PP*, p.47; p.54). Contextualising perception in this manner allows us to explain the phenomena above because, in this holistic context, each (apparently discrete) element of perception always "arouses the expectation of more than it contains" (*PP*, p.4). One initially *expects* square *B* in the Checkershadow Illusion to be 'darkened' by the shadow of the cylinder, but not to the extent that it becomes the same colour as one of the 'darker' squares. Likewise, it is essential to the carpet's specific redness that one *expects* that if one were to reach out and touch it, it would feel woolly. Even objects lying outside one's 'field of vision' retain existence within perception, Merleau-Ponty argues, as things one *expects* to see should one turn around (*PP*, p.6). If any of these expectations were frustrated, the respective meanings constitutive of one's perceptual field would change. One's world would—literally—*be* different. This is exactly what happens once one brackets the squares in the Checkershadow Illusion.

It will serve useful, as far as the phenomena allow, to disambiguate which factors contribute to the respective diacritical backgrounds of the 'objects' perceived. Most straightforwardly, Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that empirical appeals to sensations misunderstand the interplay between features *of* our experience (e.g. interrelationships of colour and/or texture) in allowing perceptual objects to stand out as they do. But there is

another, more significant, contributory feature to their backgrounds: *our* active contribution, as a situated body-subject, *to* their characteristic features. I will expand on this important point in section 2.3, but Merleau-Ponty's basic contention that the meaningful objects perceived in the preceding examples each share an *essential* relationship with the abilities, projects, and commitments of the body-subject(s) in whose perceptual horizon(s) they show up. Merleau-Ponty's carpet's phenomenal redness, for instance, is partly determined by the expectations generated by *his* irreducibly *intentional* relation with it as something on which to stand or rest his feet. This explains why its meanings—in this case its colour—will change should Merleau-Ponty find its texture rough and his expectations be frustrated. Equally, the objects behind one's back retain existence within one's perceptual field because they are the kinds of things (books, perhaps) that one might *intend* to appropriate soon. Finally, the squares in the Checkershadow Illusion change shade depending on the expectations of someone hoping to safely *navigate* the scene before them. Since our expectations co-determine the intentional character that worldly entities permit, this explains why, as the Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka observes, as a matter of phenomenal priority, things often look “attractive or repulsive before [they look] black or blue, circular or square” (Koffka, cited in *PP*, p.24).

Merleau-Ponty is suggesting, then, that *meaning*, and not some more fundamental or determinate constituent, is phenomenologically basic. This observation sits poorly with our default assumption that perceptual phenomena retain determinate qualities regardless of the fields in which they participate. Nevertheless, since this sort of ‘objective thought’ is incompatible with the phenomena on which it relies, when addressing the worldly entities revealed in perception, “[w]e must recognise the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon” (*PP*, p.6).

To clarify this stronger claim about indeterminacy, we should explore where a shift in expectation corresponds to a more extreme shift in the meaningful figure-background relationship. Merleau-Ponty's paradigm example is of seeing a shipwreck. Since one doesn't expect to see mast poles protruding from the dunes—one might be out for a stroll, not hoping to appropriate a vessel—despite perceiving the relevant scene, one fails to see the elements *as* belonging to a ship at all. The immediate perceptual content experienced is indeterminate and its elements only subsequently “fuse” to form a concrete structure (i.e. function *as* elements) as one approaches and a feeling of “uneasiness” (*PP*, p.17) is resolved. Afterwards, one cannot help but see the poles, which are the same colour as the hull and neatly integrated into the ship's superstructure, as belonging to that concrete structure. Such experiences are commonplace. But how could one miss these obvious clues as to the unity of the object? The answer is simple, Merleau-Ponty thinks, once we suspend objectivistic prejudice: the reasons

for association between elements didn't precede the perception of the whole object as unified within the context of the overall field. This is because "our perception *ends* in objects, and the object, *once constituted*, appears as the reason for all the experiences of it which we have had or could have" (*PP*, p.67, emphasis mine).

Negative support for this claim comes through Merleau-Ponty's observation that rival empirical explanations of how sensations form perceptual objects are either unfeasibly fortuitous or circular. The reasons for association between perception's allegedly atomic constituents must always be absent, Merleau-Ponty explains, because distinct sensations cannot be thought of "as *the same*" without sacrificing their essential qualitative "thisness" (*PP*, p.15). Appealing to "extrinsic connections" with other sensations is also circular since "*de facto* proximities or likenesses" cannot plausibly *cause* perceptual atoms "to associate; it is on the contrary, because we perceive a grouping as a thing that the analytical attitude can then discern likenesses or proximities" (*PP*, p.14; pp.16-7). Thus, we cannot make sense of the shipwreck experience outlined above by appealing to "the same sensations differently associated" (*PP*, p.16). It must involve a more fundamental shift in meaning generated by a shift in expectations. Merleau-Ponty puts this thought as follows:

When we come back to phenomena we find, as a basic layer of experience, a whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning: not sensations with gaps between them... but the features, the layout of a landscape or a word, in spontaneous accord with the intentions of the moment, as with earlier experience.

(*PP*, pp.21-2)

Merleau-Ponty uses the evidence cited above to argue that Gestalt theory, and not some reductive empirical alternative, is justified in limiting the reduction of phenomena where it does. According to the Gestaltists, the furthest possible reduction in perceptual analysis is to the meaningful interplay of figure and background, rather than to discrete and self-contained sensations independent of any background. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that this irreducibility isn't a contingent truth about factual perception, but "the very definition of the phenomenon of perception, that without which a phenomenon cannot be said to be perception at all" (*PP*, p.4). Sensations simply couldn't collectively 'form' our perceptual objects since seeing *anything at all* requires perceiving meanings bound up within a specific field. I expand on Merleau-Ponty's conception of the Gestalt in section 2.3. For now, it will suffice to say that, given that empirical sensations are incompatible with perception itself, we should jettison them from our account, since "[t]he structure of actual perception alone can teach us what perception is" (*PP*, p.4).

2.1.2 Objectivistic Prejudice

Merleau-Ponty thinks that empirical analyses commit what the Gestaltists call an “experience error” (*PP*, p.5) by *reflectively* transposing the qualities of things perceived into perceptual consciousness. But this error isn’t restricted to card-carrying empiricists. In a more everyday sense, we know that we experience red carpets and telephone boxes, for instance, and erroneously believe ourselves to be directly acquainted with determinate sensations of their redness as elemental constituents of our experiences of them. A related error also appears to be behind the usual binary yes/no question about whether squares *A* and *B* in the Checkershadow Illusion ‘really are’ the same shade. By beginning from the presumption that *A* and *B* are determinate, worldly things, one passes this prejudice on to one’s perceptions of that world. Thus, we tend to think that the primary constituents of perception themselves must retain (or just *be*) field-independent qualities.

However, as Kuhn helps to emphasize, since perception provides our only means of access to the more-than-human world, the experience error has ramifications beyond perceptual analysis. Not only does it distract us from the fundamental indeterminacy of perceptual contents, the insular dialectic it legitimates licences an erroneous belief in the corresponding *ontological* determinacy of the things deemed responsible for our perceptions. The substantive problem with all of this is that “[w]e make perception out of things perceived. And since perceived things themselves are obviously accessible only through perception, we end up by understanding neither” (*PP*, p.5). Since perception *ends* in objects, Merleau-Ponty argues, we can only hope to discern the world’s physiognomy by returning, as far as possible, to the perceptual phenomena themselves.

Taken this far, Merleau-Ponty’s critique amounts to suggesting that a tacit adherence to empiricism’s underpinning objectivistic presuppositions leads us to misconceive the targets of our concern, because we mistake perception’s resultant objects or properties for its fundamental constituents. More problematically, these objectivistic presuppositions thereby licence neglecting the diacritical background essential for any such objects or properties to present themselves the way that they do. But Merleau-Ponty contends that the distorting influence of objective thought spread further than this since, largely because of the experience error, the discrete objects finally registered in perception come to occupy a *privileged* ontological position. Objects, now reflectively purified of their diacritical relationships, become the fundamental ontological constituents of the more-than-human world (*PP*, p.71). Once conceived in this manner, Merleau-Ponty thinks, we become prone to overlook our objectifying tendencies and the reflective character of any objects we uncover by granting them the status of objects-in-themselves. That is, in conceiving of entities *as* objects we take

ourselves to be acting in accordance with the basic preconditions of addressing them on their own terms. We even take the incompatibility of any such determinate objects with the phenomenological data (e.g. via the Gestaltists' experiments or the Checkershadow Illusion) to be a mark of *perception's* failure to attend properly to the facts. That is, a tendency on the part of the epistemic 'subject' to *misrepresent* the way the world 'objectively' is. Attending to this shortcoming then becomes the privileged remit of the natural sciences.

We see this sort of objectivistic prejudice manifested most clearly in naturalized accounts of the physiology of perception, which allegedly provide a "higher court of appeal" (*PP*, p.7) than psychological analyses because physiology uses the 'impersonal' and rigorously empirical third-person data of biologists, chemists, or physicists to establish the world's objective contents. According to the still-dominant physiological account (which we shall explore more thoroughly in chapter four), bodily structures are typically taken to form an "anatomical path leading from a *receiver* through a definite *transmitter* to a recording station", where the message is then decoded to "reproduce in us the original text" (*PP*, p.7). This account licences the well-known "reflex arc theory" (*PP*, p.7) of perception, and motor behaviour more broadly, as fundamentally mechanistic¹³. In principle, this account also then supports the "constancy hypothesis", central to the empirical hypothesis which, I've noted, demands "a point-by-point correspondence and constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception" (*PP*, p.7).

However, we've already seen good reason to believe that the constancy hypothesis is irreconcilable with the phenomenological data. If Merleau-Ponty's contentions hold, one cannot straightforwardly identify 'the sensible' with the direct effects of external stimuli because, as Merleau-Ponty's carpet and shipwreck demonstrate, it is "bound up with a whole perceptual content" (*PP*, p.8). By beginning from a prejudice towards the primacy of an 'objective' world, however, naturalized physiological accounts repeat the objectivistic error that haunts the psychological account of sensation. Once one includes one's body in this picture—and why wouldn't one, if objects are fundamentally determinate and bodies (or their elemental constituents) are themselves objects?—it is a short step to the physiological transmission model and the constancy hypothesis it legitimates.

¹³ According to 'reflex arc' accounts, motor behaviours can be wholly explained by reference to the mechanical relationships between external stimuli and the various 'objective' physiological phenomena in a given neural pathway. Although, on these accounts, reflexes may be conditioned, any such conditioning remains a mechanical relationship between the allegedly determinate entities involved. Reflex arc theorists (e.g. Pavlov, 1927) ordinarily eschew behavioural explanations which retain essential reference to intentional or existential significances.

To clarify: the issue introduced *here* isn't only that, as a manifestation of objective thought, empiricism licences reifying properties or objects-in-themselves as ontologically primitive entities, nor that it conceals the reflective character of this reification, but also that—ostensibly by naturalizing her previous acts of reification (i.e. by limiting explananda to objects-in-themselves)—the empiricist apparently requires us to understand the body as one more determinate object amongst others. One's body is, therefore, doomed to be subsumed under the same restrictive, positivistic, terms that natural scientists afford to other worldly objects. We saw Brown note in the introductory chapter that, according to the stipulations of our dominant scientific paradigm, doing so limits bodies to being reductively characterized "*partes extra partes*" (PP, p.73): a series of determinate extensional properties, related to one another only through a causal matrix.

But what exactly is wrong with this austere account of the body? For one thing, the transmission account corresponds poorly with even the empirical data. Although there is observable "collaboration" (PP, p.8) between the physiological sensory and motor systems, perceptual content isn't obviously affected by them in the requisite manner to licence the theoretical posits above. Merleau-Ponty's famous analysis of Kurt Goldstein's patient, Schneider, demonstrates this. The transmission model must hold that Schneider's difficulties are the 'mechanical' result of an injury to the occipital region, from which we should merely expect disruption to Schneider's visual field. But Schneider reports a host of other changes to his perceptual relationship with the world; not least that he cannot recognise familiar houses unless he leaves with the intention of travelling there (PP, p.134). "Schneider's case", Merleau-Ponty argues, "shows deficiencies affecting the junction of sensitivity and significance, deficiencies which disclose the existential conditioning of both" (PP, p.131).

Comparisons might be drawn here with Merleau-Ponty's shipwreck. In both cases perceivers are granted sufficient sensory experience to discern the 'objective' structure of the figure ('ship' or 'friend's house'), but don't (yet) do so because the phenomenal meanings available to them are bound up with others within a perceptual field. Schneider's case is complicated by his injury, but this merely has the effect that he loses the ability to recognise familiar places under certain circumstances. As Merleau-Ponty notes, Schneider *can* register the house if he intends to travel there because—as will become clearer in sections 2.3 and 2.4—a crucial factor in discerning meaning within the Gestalt is granted by the differential expectations generated by one's *motor intentional* relationship with the world. Such relationships, however, are more-or-less fundamentally incompatible with empiricism's underlying objectivistic stipulations, and these stipulations are also imparted to any natural science it licences. Thus, any attempt to return to 'the things themselves' proves incompatible

with empiricism because empiricism—as a manifestation of objective thought—“builds up all knowledge out of determinate qualities” and “offers us objects purged of all ambiguity, pure and absolute, the ideal rather than the real themes of knowledge: in short it is compatible only with the lately developed superstructure of consciousness” (*PP*, p.11).

2.1.3 Science Lacks Ontological Neutrality

As should be obvious from the above, the ‘lately developed superstructure’ Merleau-Ponty mentions roughly approximates the sort of subject/object schema which, we’ve seen Latour suggest, typifies modernity and which continues to underpin contemporary natural science. It continues to do so because natural science retains a largely positivistic remit which seeks to exhaustively uncover empirically-real *objects* or properties as they are allegedly manifested to a transcendent or transcendental *subject* (if any reference is made to a subject at all)¹⁴. This remains a common commitment amongst scientists even if, in a post-Kantian context, those objects cannot be taken to correspond absolutely with the ‘noumenal’ *things-in-themselves*. Natural scientists—at least insofar as they consistently claim any sort of epistemic access to the more-than-human world¹⁵—still aim to establish at least transcendently-purified access to the modality of the in-itself and the allegedly determinate ‘objects’ (including any bodies) therein. One major problem with doing so, as we’ve seen above, is that the ‘objects’ ordinarily uncovered by the natural scientist misconstrue the phenomena presented to “the ultimate court of appeal in our knowledge of these things, our experience of them” (*PP*, p.23).

Furthermore, to retain the requisite universality of its epistemological contentions, even in a post-Kantian context, natural science still tends to limit the contribution of the transcendental subject to her imposition of a limited range of *common* human concepts. Doing so means that the entities natural scientists trade in retain no obvious reference to the specific diacritical features of the *concrete* phenomenological fields in which they are discerned. Natural science thus gives the impression of addressing the objective “shape of the world” from the mistakenly reified, desituated point of view that Merleau-Ponty calls “high-altitude thought” and Donna Haraway calls “the God trick” (*PP*, p.23; *VI*, p.69; Haraway, 1991, p.189). From this

¹⁴ Given its naturalistic remit, science cannot *obviously* account for the experiential subjectivity on which its possibility rests. As the sway towards reductive forms of naturalism in metaphysics and the philosophy of mind testifies, a central goal of contemporary science has been to explain consciousness *away* because of its incompatibility with scientific apparatuses (see Ladyman and Ross, 2007; Churchland, 1981; or Dennett, 1993).

¹⁵ Not all do. Niels Bohr, for instance, refused to ontologize the findings of his quantum physics. For Bohr, ‘objectivity’ refers only to the possibility for unambiguous communication between human scientists who share certain metaphysical and cultural prejudices. As Chris Calvert-Minor (2013, pp.127-8) notes, recognising that it is *human scientists* who disambiguate phenomena means that, for Bohr, one always lacks epistemic access the more-than-human world itself. Bohr’s rejection of objective thought comes at the cost of being unable to provide a nonanthropocentric (meta-)physics.

transcendental purview, Merleau-Ponty thinks, the allegedly determinate ontological fragments of the world only reflectively discerned by natural science—the physicist’s quarks, the biologist’s atoms, or the ecologist’s energy flows, for instance—“will always appear more real than the historical and qualitative face of the world” (*PP*, p.23) given in pre-reflective experience. This helps to further explain why natural scientific terms are given deliberative priority over the more partisan, transient, or nebulous (e.g. affective, aesthetic, or axiological) terms of phenomenological experience: the former are deemed to score better in terms of ‘objectivity’ because of their alleged perceiver-independence or neutrality.

One further problem with the privileged status afforded to the natural sciences is that, as I noted in my introductory chapter, by focusing squarely on the modality of the in-itself, science also limits itself, in principle, in terms of the properties it can find in the world. As Brown (2003, p.8) notes, within the naturalized discourse of extensional realism motivated by natural science’s investigation of objects-in-themselves, ‘objectivity’ conforms to a tripartite set of conditions requiring the scientist’s target to be mind-independent (at least within the usual Kantian confines), wholly-determinable, and admit of only a single correct description. ‘Meaning’ violates each of these criteria because it isn’t obviously discernible independent of the Gestalt structure in which it is expressed. Meaning is, therefore, largely exorcised from natural scientific accounts of more-than-human reality because it lacks objectivity; not because meaning doesn’t show up as a basic constituent of experience, but because it apparently doesn’t show up *in the right way*. Thus, Merleau-Ponty claims, science’s positivistic and objectivistic remit means that it limits or distorts the phenomena which, by right, should underwrite our ontologies and epistemologies. Nevertheless, because of our tacit commitment to objective thought, science enjoys a status of higher authority on that very basis. Undercutting these objectivistic prejudices necessitates an attempt to return to the phenomena themselves, “and it is this pre-objective realm we have to explore in ourselves if we wish to understand sense experience” (*PP*, p.12).

So, where are we? It should be clear that Merleau-Ponty’s real target isn’t any particular empirical account, but the objective thought which underpins it. Nevertheless if, as Merleau-Ponty and Kuhn both claim, experience is the ultimate authority in even our scientific attempts to understand the more-than-human world, then it *is* important to address—as we have above—the theories of perception implicit in any ultimate justification of the terms of debate. Simply put: if the subject/object schema and, particularly, the presupposition that more-than-human reality is furnished by mind-independent objects-in-themselves, lacks phenomenological justification, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, then we have grounds for alarm, given that these objectivistic presuppositions underpin scientific naturalism. Moreover, if, as

Merleau-Ponty suggests, natural science “is the second-order expression” (*PP*, p.viii) of phenomena, where scientific claims contradict or deny the pre-scientific phenomenology on which they rely (e.g. through the physiological transmission model, or through the basic denial of meaning’s ontological reality), we’re given grounds to reject them. Since natural science lacks ontological neutrality, then, a genuine ‘return to the things themselves is from the start a foreswearing of science’.

2.1.4 The Environmental Risks of an Unreflective Science

I’ve said very little about the environmental crisis in this chapter. I’ve explored how a misplaced adherence to objective thought may be intimately related to the objectivistic metaphysical stipulations inherited by natural scientists, but this alone says nothing about the violence I hold these stipulations to licence. Before charting the route Merleau-Ponty prescribes to return to the more-than-human things themselves, then, it will be instructive to briefly explore how the aforementioned stipulations may influence the attitudes and behaviours characteristic of our crisis situation.

We’ve seen Merleau-Ponty argue that the assumption of objective thought leads natural scientists to reflectively reconfigure the phenomena on which they rely. The larger problem with this is that the terms of scientific reflection render science unable to interrogate its own project, commitments, or boundaries. Merleau-Ponty puts this concern as follows:

Science manipulates things and gives up living in them. It makes its own limited models of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their definition, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals. Science is and always has been that admirably active, ingenious, and bold way of thinking whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-general—as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our use.

(*EM*, p.159)

By failing to acknowledge its background commitments and presuppositions, science also presents everything as if it were ‘predestined for our use’. This is because the richness, indeterminacy, and alterity of the world is sacrificed from the outset by the reflective boundaries of scientific intelligibility through which something’s ‘objective’ nature may be appropriated by the suitably attentive observer.

Heidegger’s analysis of ‘technology’ helps to highlight some dangers in this mode of revelation. Heidegger argues that technology, like natural science, is a particular “way of

revealing” (1977, p.5) the world that is motivated by the modernist schema under which epistemic subjects investigate an ideally-separable ontic realm¹⁶. According to Heidegger, “[t]he revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such” (1977, p.6). We’re familiar with its underpinning essence, or “Enframing” (1977, p.9), via intensive agriculture where ‘soil’ becomes shorthand for ‘mineral deposit’, or industrial oil ‘fracking’ in which proposals rest on how much energy can be ‘unlocked’, and so on. Less obvious examples permeate our everyday interactions: think, for example, about the near-ubiquitous references made to ‘manpower’ or ‘human resources’. Through technological Enframing, *everything* is properly characterized as “standing reserve” (1977, p.8) in a fundamental sense.

Technology limits the scope of ontology such that more-than-human entities can only really show up as wholly-calculable collections of forces or energy reserves. Heidegger holds that technology, therefore, effectively reduces more-than-human entities to their use-value-for-us. But the error involved in technological Enframing is more-than-cognitive. By setting the metaphysical boundaries it does, technology dictates the shape that affective or behavioural engagement with those entities takes. If rainforests, for example, are reducible to the goods (e.g. timber, fuel, bushmeat) and services they may provide for us (e.g. by regulating local climates or ‘recycling’ carbon dioxide emissions), then, since they *are* resources, we will inevitably relate to them as primarily things to be used.

What Heidegger helps us to tease out is that, under technology at least, the behavioural violence emblematic of our crisis situation (aggressive deforestation, excessive fuel consumption, overfishing, and so on) appears to be non-accidentally related to the violence already implicit in the terms of debate. Bryan Bannon (2014, p.64) notes that technological Enframing effectively naturalizes “usefulness” as an ontologically real property-in-itself. In fact, ‘usefulness’ (variously conceived) becomes *the* definitive property of objects-in-general. Bannon argues that technology thereby conceals the asymmetrical relationship between ‘resource’ and ‘beneficiary’ from which any such use-value always derives and, ultimately, naturalizes *mastery* as one’s ordinary means of relating to the more-than-human world. In this context, there can be no clear line of demarcation between violent actions (practice) and the conceptual means (theory) by which those violent acts are licenced. This is because theory delineates the ways we relate to the entities it posits as a matter of *praxis*. But it is also because

¹⁶ Although some dispute whether technological Enframing is specifically modern, the literature is in little doubt that it is, to a great degree, facilitated by modernistic sediment (Idhe, 1993; Feenberg, 1999).

technology's utilitarian metaphysics arises, to some degree, from the partial and interested ways that we *already* habitually relate to the rest of the world (i.e. as objects to appropriate).

How is this salient to our present debate? Even conceived through a technological lens, sustained engagement with 'environmental issues' isn't impossible; it is just limited to 'solutions' regarding effective *resource* allocation or sustainable *consumption*, because nonhuman 'objects' are ontologically reducible to 'natural resources'. Under Heidegger's understanding at least, the technoscientific environmentalist can be an environmentalist only insofar as she concerns herself with how to meet fuel, water, or protein needs more sustainably. She simply isn't free, however, to relate to the rainforest other than as a storehouse or "gloried septic tank" (Evernden, 2003, p.22) because, for her, the rainforest *just is* its utility. Thus, if some of the problematic behaviours above can be traced back to this sort of hierarchical, utilitarian purview which Evernden calls "resourcism" (2003, p.22), then technoscientific 'solutions' like those we've seen Crutzen prescribe—*consuming* less meat, *utilising* bio-adaptive technologies, *managing* natural *resources*—can play only a limited role in addressing our environmental crisis. If theory and praxis are as intimately connected as it appears, then it is implausible to expect a colonial conceptual scheme to bring about the anticolonial behaviours and attitudes required to mitigate our crisis situation at root. To cite Audre Lorde's dictum: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (1983, p.94).

One might nonetheless be forgiven for wondering how this discussion of technology relates to our critique of naturalism, given that technology and natural science aren't straightforwardly synonymous. The committed ecologist or biologist, for example, would rightly balk at the suggestion that she must identify all ontologically real entities (marine ecosystem, sea cucumber, eel's digestive tract, and so on) with their use-value *for human beings*. However, Heidegger emphasizes that technological Enframing is made possible only through the reductive descriptions that science affords:

Modern science's way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces. Modern physics is not experimental physics because it applies apparatus to the questioning of nature. Rather the reverse is true. Because physics, indeed already as pure theory, sets nature up to exhibit itself as a coherence of forces calculable in advance, it therefore orders its experiments precisely for the purpose of asking whether and how nature reports itself when set up in this way.

(1977, p.10)

Heidegger is driving at more-or-less the same point which concerned Merleau-Ponty above, albeit primarily from an ontological rather than straightforwardly phenomenological direction. He is suggesting that natural scientists cannot begin from a neutral starting point in their attempts to derive knowledge about the more-than-human world because any such attempt requires a *determinate* field of enquiry and, therefore, the inauguration of background conditions which determine that field. These conditions will subsequently dictate the appropriate epistemological apparatuses and truth conditions, and, ultimately, allow science's target objects to show up for observation as they do. Like Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger argues that natural science cannot, therefore, straightforwardly arbitrate the distinction of real from unreal entities—and, thus, provide the privileged ontological grounds for environmental philosophy—because science doesn't dispassionately address the more-than-human world independently of the background commitments which determine its findings. Indeed, Heidegger concurs with Merleau-Ponty that, by reifying the thing-in-itself as the basic element available for analysis, the scientist already reflectively distorts the underlying phenomena and admits only problematically restrictive (usually positivistic) means of epistemic access to them.

If, as Merleau-Ponty (*PP*, p.viii) and Heidegger (1999, p.102) both claim, natural science is motivated by the desire to achieve a systematic and *totalizing* account of the more-than-human world, then this would explain why science (and not just technology) limits its sphere of enquiry to a wholly-determinable realm of things-in-themselves. Given that contemporary science effectively defines any such entities in terms of their *causal* properties, however, then the connections between science and technology are more intimate, and potentially dangerous, than it first appears. This is because, not only are meaning, indeterminacy, (nonhuman) agency, and alterity made antagonistic to science's basic explanatory project, nonhuman entities are permitted to exist by the scientist in virtue of a remarkably narrow set of extensional properties, which are non-accidentally related to the method or task set for them—by the scientist—from the outset.

Put differently: if, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, natural science is motivated by a certain kind of explanatory project (i.e. to more effectively navigate or better utilise worldly 'objects' as part of an intersubjective community), then science's findings cannot be entirely detached from the utilitarian assumptions and apparatuses partly constitutive of that background. Nor can they be entirely detached from the objectivistic assumption of a realm of wholly determinate and determinable objects-in-themselves; an assumption which derives largely from a misunderstanding of perception, yet which provides the background legitimacy of natural science's totalizing project in the first place. More problematically, these assumptions

will also delineate any ‘solutions’ licenced by understanding environmental ‘issues’ as science dictates.

Although these concerns might sound curiously abstract, it isn’t difficult to find examples to substantiate them. I want to focus here on a less obvious one: where ecological terms are appropriated by the ecosystem services literature. At first glance, this literature promises more positive and self-reflexive ways to understand and relate to the more-than-human world. Whilst the (e.g. aesthetic, nutritional, or geochemical) services ecosystemic entities provide within ecosystem services frameworks are almost always made with reference to a human beneficiary, these asymmetric use-relationships aren’t surreptitiously Enframed as properties of things-in-themselves. Rather, the asymmetry between entities is emphasized as part of what constitutes a valuable ‘service’ in the first place (Jax *et al*, 2013, p.261). Furthermore, in principle, ecosystem services approaches allow more-than-human entities to be valued non-instrumentally (like in the case of sacred landscapes which aren’t substitutable in the sense that the language of ‘instrumental value’ might imply), and even recognise ‘meaning’ (e.g. the aesthetic value of a glacier) to be ontologically real (Jax *et al*, 2013, p.262).

Nevertheless, ecosystem services approaches remain problematic because their basic ontological presuppositions, if not their whole ontology, are inherited from the ecological science employed to motivate biodiversity preservation in conservation biology (Jax *et al*, 2013, p.264). Within this purview, species biodiversity, for instance, is taken to be valuable insofar as its reduction has the potential for a demonstrably negative (i.e. causal and measurable) impact on the health of the ecosystem, subsystem, and such. Ecosystem services approaches simply seek to extend the kinds of health or wellbeing under consideration by ecologists. What remains, therefore, *is* an understanding of more-than-human entities as more-or-less reducible to natural *resources*—in the sense of being reducible to their causal powers—if not straightforwardly to resources-*for-us*. But we should emphasize that the problem here isn’t solely that the ecosystem services concept was borne of a project focusing on more sophisticated economic analyses of conservation initiatives. A deeper issue persists because, as Bannon (2014, p.68) argues, the totalizing assumption that more-than-human reality consists of a set of wholly-calculable or orderable forces is the grounding principle on which ecological science rests and so simply isn’t up for fundamental revision in *any* extension or application of it.

What’s interesting about the ecosystem services literature, then, is that, whilst it can restore concepts like meaning and value to the more-than-human world, it can do so only at second remove. Any such concepts are, therefore, coloured by the implicitly utilitarian background

against which things emerge as ontological entities for the ecologist in the first place. To reiterate: this is because, as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty both argue, the ecologist's objectivistic metaphysical presuppositions are intimately related to the projects and methods under which 'the natural world' is inaugurated as a determinate field of scientific enquiry. The background against which ecological science becomes intelligible is one which seemingly requires the epistemic investigator to conceptualise and, ultimately, relate to all more-than-human entities *as* collections of latent causal powers (i.e. resources). It shouldn't be entirely surprising, therefore, that the ecosystem services approach lends itself so readily to straightforward monetisation and other economic and technoscientific means of commodifying the more-than-human world (Jax *et al*, 2013, p.261).

Of course, the above doesn't mean that ecologists are necessarily *bound* to Enframe the world in Heidegger's more obviously anthropocentric sense. Heidegger concedes that there is no straightforward entailment relationship between natural science and technological Enframing. Nevertheless, the dominant illusion that the latter is the logical consequence of the former "can maintain itself only so long as neither the essential origin of modern science nor indeed the essence of modern technology is adequately found out through questioning" (Heidegger, 1977, p.11). Such questioning must take place at a metatheoretical level and cannot, therefore, be carried out by science itself. Given its narrow epistemological remit, "science does not think" (Heidegger, 1977, p.8). An interrogation of the violence implicit in our 'submerged mass' must aim to situate itself outside of the objectivistic and utilitarian prejudices of scientific naturalism. This means that genuinely radical reflection must be—at least *from the start*—a forswearing of science.

A word of caution might be wise. Although Heidegger is sometimes interpreted in this way, it would be disastrous for environmental philosophers to adopt an anti-scientific (rather than anti-*scientific*) viewpoint:

ecophenomenologists should not throw modern science overboard. We owe the sciences our knowledge of climate change, species and habitat loss, ocean and soil degradation, and other facets of the ecological crisis. Having said that... we also need to criticise the technoscientific project of knowing and controlling the whole of nature.

(Stone, 2015, p.2)

In this spirit, I suggest that we follow Merleau-Ponty in taking natural science to provide only a *regional* understanding about a world that is already constrained or carved-up according to the stipulated background terms and methods of enquiry. Doing so allows science to remain

informative and important in understanding the contours of our environmental crisis and some means of responding to it. However, doing so also requires ceding the *basic* court of appeal in ontological and epistemological matters to the phenomenological contexts in which scientific insights are always garnered. In this sense, natural science might be said to return to

the ‘there is’ which underlies it; the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body—not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but that actual body I call mine.

(EM, p.160)

“In this primal historicity”, Merleau-Ponty thinks, “science’s agile and improvisatory thought will learn to ground itself upon things themselves and upon itself, and will once more become philosophy” (EM, p.161). We shall later see how ecophenomenology might marry the importance of scientific insights with a more robust method of (self-)reflection. It is enough, at this stage, to note the dangers inherent to natural science’s underlying objectivistic commitments without disregarding scientific contributions to knowledge.

2.1.5 Why Intellectualism Won’t Help

In the section above, I suggested that natural science distorts the phenomena which open its possibility, and that it is prone to legitimate a problematically utilitarian world view that science is itself ill-equipped to address. The responsibility for these concerns appears to lie primarily in its adherence to objective thought, which licences the violence manifested in a utilitarian or objectivistic praxis by neglecting the perceiver’s contribution to the basic physiognomy of any objects encountered. Perhaps, then, science’s problem lies in its empiricism. Under empiricism, “attention” is “a general and unconditioned power... applied indifferently to any content of consciousness” (PP, p.26), but this proves insufficient to explain the intertwining relationships involved in the determination of perceptual objects. By failing to acknowledge the body-subject’s intentional contribution to the background context in which natural science operates, empiricism distorts the phenomena on which it relies and reifies its own way of revealing as universal or “acosmic” (PP, p.24). As we saw above, empiricism may also thereby serve to perpetuate anthropogenic violence by naturalizing hierarchical and utilitarian ways of relating to the more-than-human world.

By making attention an active faculty, however, “intellectualism” seeks to acknowledge the contribution of the perceiver required for the entities described by natural science to present themselves with the physiognomy they do (PP, p.27). ‘Intellectualism’ refers to the Kantian or Cartesian sort of rationalism under which “perception must be organized by, indeed

it just *is*, thought or judgement” (Carman, 2005, p.59). In Descartes’ case, for instance, appropriately-focused attention illuminates the wax’s essential qualities as described by Galilean physics. For Descartes, one also *perceives*, but doesn’t straightforwardly *see*, the men outside hidden by hats and coats. One *judges* them to be there (1996, pp.20-1). Likewise, for Kant, even one’s perception of a cube is governed by *a priori* conceptual structures which offer lawlike rules for how an object must appear to a situated subject given their relation in ‘objective space’ (*PP*, pp.300-1; Jensen, 2013, p.50). Intellectualism, therefore, retains a key focus on the intentional contribution of the perceiver to objects perceived, which is denied under empiricism to its detriment. Furthermore, since it is also compatible with a naturalistic remit, a successful intellectualism might legitimate (intellectualist) natural science’s continued stronghold on the ‘material’ or ‘contentful’ aspects of our knowledge of the more-than-human world.

The main problem with the intellectualist account, however, is that “[s]ince in attention I experience an elucidation *of* the object, the perceived object must already contain the intelligible structure which it reveals” (*PP*, p.27). Merleau-Ponty’s point is that, if intellectualism is to avoid a problem of vicious regress under which any account of the origin of perceptual content is forever omitted, the intellectualist is left with two equally unsatisfactory options. The first is to concede that the world’s intentional physiognomy is merely projected or constructed by the epistemic subject. Neither Kant or Descartes, nor their heirs in this tradition (including Meillassoux), will accept the first option since it effectively denies the mind-independence of the entities science investigates. Given that our present concern is partly to do with whether natural science is equipped to address the more-than-human world on its own, rich terms, this option should be ruled out *a priori*.

Intellectualists must opt for the other option: to “maintain an element of the empiricist idea of a manifold of sensory matter which is synthesized by the understanding” (Jensen, 2013, p.51). Even Kant, who rejects any ontologically real ‘sensations’ in the empiricist mould, concedes that one must nevertheless appeal to an “*ideally separable* sensuous moment of perception” (Jensen, 2013, p.51) to retain the requisite realism about the mind-independent world received in perception. However, Rasmus Jensen notes that the issue arises, for Merleau-Ponty, that if Kantian intuitions were blind (i.e. *meaningless*), then they couldn’t guide the synthetic activities of the understanding. Judgement would become the “indifferent linking of objects” and the concepts Kant introduces to explain how intuitions are guided or associated couldn’t avoid being “empty” and, therefore, redundant in their task (*PP*, p.32). Something more prescriptive is needed. For Kant, this comes through understanding Newton

and Descartes' reductive, mechanistic principles to be legislative *a priori*s, somehow "of Nature" (N, p.23), which determine how it must be revealed by the understanding.

The second option, therefore, suffers a predictable problem: by taking up an empiricist account of the sensory manifold, the intellectualist appears bound to inherit the empiricist's objectivistic assumptions. It is because its account of perception derives from the 'sensations' of empiricism that even Kantian intellectualism ultimately concedes the very objective thought which haunts empiricism, albeit in the mode of 'empirical realism'. Empiricism and intellectualism, therefore, "have this idea in common, that attention creates nothing, since a world of impressions in itself or a universe of determining thought are equally independent of the action of mind" (PP, p.28). This is why post-Kantian science effectively results in little more than resituating pre-critical scientific realism in the context of transcendental idealism and, therefore, represents very little interrogation of its objectivistic and utilitarian terms. Meaning continues to be ruled out as a basic feature of the world *itself* under intellectualism no less than empiricism; not because attentive judgement rightly demands it, but because intellectualism rests on the same *objectivistic* misunderstandings about phenomena that empiricism does.

Intellectualism cannot provide a solution to science's problems because it conflates perception and judgement. Intellectualism also thereby seems to refute itself. Once one 'realises' that the squares in the Checkershadow Illusion, for instance, 'are' the same colour—that is, the 'objective' stimuli are the same colour—one judges them to be so. Nevertheless, one continues to experience their colours *as* indeterminate, fluctuating between shades. This suggests an *inherent* distinction between perception and judgement, because "things do not always *really* appear to me the way I *think* they appear, and intellectualism can make no sense of that distinction" (Carman, 2005, p.63). Thus, "to perceive in the full sense of the word", it seems, "is not to judge, it is to apprehend an immanent sense in the sensible before judgement begins" (PP, p.35). What intellectualism misses no less than empiricism is that the meanings which we receive *in* perception, and which are essential to *guide* judgement, must constitute a constituent component *of* our perceptions themselves.

Intellectualism's problems ultimately derive from its account of the transcendental subject presiding freely over objects-in-themselves. "It thus does away with all problems except one: that of its own beginning" (PP, p.38). By moving from the radical 'objectivity' of empiricism to the radical 'subjectivity' of intellectualism, then, the allegedly determinate exteriority of the 'objective' world is left intact. But we lose even the (untenable) transmission account of how one comes to perceive people, wax, sea cucumbers, or carbon deposits because

‘perception’ becomes ‘thought about perception’. A concerted attempt to return to the things themselves, then, must begin with an approach to perception which rejects these cleavages. One must account for the fundamental ‘subjectivity’—by which I mean something like ‘concrete intentional meanings’—of perception abandoned by the former, and, in doing so, one must retain a plausible account of the pre-reflective phenomena, which is lost in the latter. Given that both errors appear to be grounded in a basic commitment to objective thought and the subject/object schema it legitimates, our task requires problematizing the binarism bequeathed by modernism. Doing so becomes possible by acknowledging the intentional salience of one’s *embodiment* in establishing the phenomena which underwrite our theoretical contentions. In what follows, I will explore how Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology might juggle these requirements through its radical appropriation of Gestalt theory.

2.2 The Gestalt

We’ve seen reason to believe that the issues surveyed above can be largely traced back to the metaphysical prejudices licenced by objective thought. Since scientific naturalism relies on the very objectivistic assumptions under scrutiny, this means that an attempt to ‘return to the things themselves’ must begin by suspending the presumption of naturalistic metaphysics. Gestalt theory, however, shows promise for our task because it registers the primary importance of *form* or *structure* in establishing ontological or epistemological claims which derive from phenomenological experience.

But before we turn to the specifics of Merleau-Pontian Gestalt theory, we should field a potential concern. The contemporary reader might find the appeal to classical Gestalt psychology a strange source of justification given its unpopularity amongst contemporary psychologists and cognitive scientists. It is noteworthy, however, that Gestalt psychology hasn’t become unpopular because it contends that perceptual phenomena cannot be reduced beyond figure-background relations. It is criticised, rather, because of its apparent inability to explain those phenomena causally, and because its findings resist precise quantitative measurement. The former concern is one which Merleau-Ponty explicitly accepts. Gestalts cannot be explanatory in any simple causal sense because, as we saw above, we simply couldn’t make sense of putative causal phenomena more mereologically basic than Gestalt-objects (*SB*, pp.143-4). The latter concern has recently been challenged but, more importantly, if, as the literature suggests (e.g. Jäkel *et al*, 2016, p.5; Wagemans *et al*, 2012, p.1219), both concerns ultimately boil down to a failure to cohere with the reductive and mechanistic explanatory framework that dominates contemporary cognitive neuroscience, then this ‘failure’ to adhere to its objectivistic terms needn’t be a fatal problem for Gestalt theory,

especially given the role that those terms plausibly play in licencing the violence emblematic of our present environmental context.

Nonetheless, as Merleau-Ponty makes clear, if perception provides our only means of access to the more-than-human world and, perceptually speaking, the Gestalt is irreducible, then we should resist the urge to situate the Gestalt in naturalistic terms. Merleau-Ponty accuses the classical Gestaltists of this error. He argues that classical Gestalt psychology retains a certain neo-Kantian intellectualism insofar as it seeks to establish an ontologically determinate realm of objects which are, paradoxically, inaccessible to perceiving subjects on their own (i.e. non-correlational) terms (*SB*, p.224). This criticism is important, because the shift in approach required to appreciate the Gestalt-situatedness of our ontological and epistemological contentions will shape the ecophenomenological recommendations that follow. Given the *environmental* focus of this thesis, however, it will be instructive to explore in more detail this how this same error also impedes the work of even revolutionary natural scientists like Kuhn, who might otherwise be thought to evade the various concerns identified in this chapter.

Kuhn explores Gestalt-shift in the context of scientific paradigm shift. For Kuhn, although scientists may perceive phenomena differently (e.g. when Hershel thought he saw a comet, but later recognised that he really saw the planet, Uranus), “[s]cientists do not see something *as* something else; instead they simply see it” (1970, p.85). Kuhn’s point isn’t that all scientists receive qualitatively identical sense data and merely judge it differently. That is the “usual view” (1970, p.121) of science, which Kuhn problematizes and blames Descartes for inaugurating. Kuhn’s point is that scientists can differentially perceive the *real* objects based on the (meta-)theoretical presuppositions and experimental apparatuses they apply. Nevertheless, for Kuhn, “the world does not change”; there exists “the same constellation of objects”, only subsequently carved-up according the intentional requirements of differing scientific paradigms (1970, pp.121-2). Kuhn acknowledges that the phenomena registered by Aristotle and Galileo differed depending on their conceptual manipulation as either ‘pendulums’ or ‘constrained falls’, for example. However, Kuhn argues, both still see *the* swinging stones—or, more precisely, their alleged constituents: the “many related chemical, electrical or dynamical phenomena” (1970, p.129)—in much the same way that one might see a duck or rabbit, yet the lines on the page exist as determinate things-in-themselves. Despite Kuhn’s insistence that scientific claims rely on their underlying perceptual phenomena, then, even naturalized Gestalt theories like his remain problematically beholden to the determinate objects that objective thought mistakes for the primary constituents of ontological reality.

In a familiar move, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that “[i]t is from the universe of perceived things that Gestalt theory borrows its notion of form” (*SB*, p.144). Through their tacit intellectualism, Kuhn and the Gestalt psychologists made a category mistake by failing to realise that “in the final analysis form cannot be defined in terms of reality but in terms of knowledge, not a thing of the physical world but as a perceived whole” (*SB*, p.143). Given the irreducibility of the Gestalt to something more perceptually basic, and the concession that both epistemology and ontology rely absolutely on perception, neither the Gestalt nor its allegedly determinate constituents can be consistently or unproblematically taken to be found *in* the world-in-itself (noumenal or otherwise). The Gestalt must, rather, exist for the perceiver as the unity of her perceptual wholes; perceptual consciousness must be a Gestalt like any other.

Merleau-Ponty’s point here is a subtle one, but one that is essential to ecophenomenology’s potential to address the objectivistic assumptions which pervade natural science and, ultimately, to disrupt the violence which fundamental commitment to the naturalistic purview licences. To illustrate, recall Uexküll’s ticks. For the tick, the world’s meanings show up in a manner intimately related to the kind of entity the tick *is*. Given its physiological and functional orientation, the ‘smell’ of butyric acid exists *as* a phenomenon and the taste of raisins, for example, does not. That is not to say that the tick isn’t interested in the raisins, but that ‘raisins’ don’t form part of the composite structure of the tick’s meaningful phenomenal world in the Kantian sense Uexküll officially invokes. The problem we saw Uexküll identify in the introductory chapter becomes important here, because the tick’s world is intractable from the tick’s immanent participation in its own *Umwelt* or (eschewing the neo-Kantian connotations of the former term) Gestalt. For natural science to accurately and exhaustively describe the tick, its world, or *the* ‘objective’ world from which the tick’s derives, then, would be to attempt metaphysical speculation from the viewpoint of acosmic subjective consciousness that Merleau-Ponty rightly problematizes. Likewise, for natural science to exhaustively determine the ‘mind-independent’ reality of ticks, rainforests, or marine ecosystems requires the problematic assumption of an objective world with which one, as an epistemic subject, is somehow transcendently acquainted. More basically, it also requires misplaced adherence to the background stipulations of objective thought under which butyric acid, raisins, rainforests, and marine ecosystems are representations or constellations of some ontologically determinate phenomena. Not only are each of these commitments misplaced, insofar as they implicitly licence the colonial imposition of a naturalistic metaphysics, they also hamper our attempts to address the violent attitudes and behaviours responsible for our crisis situation.

Some mainstream environmental theorists have attempted to rehabilitate naturalism by taking up insights like Uexküll's from within a naturalistic remit. But they only serve to illustrate the problematic tensions between acknowledging our Gestalt-situatedness and the sort of naturalism which ordinarily delineates our ontological and epistemological contentions about the more-than-human world. The sociobiologist E.O. Wilson, for instance, formally subscribes to a radical neo-Kantianism under which "the idiosyncrasies of human evolution" dictate the ways the world is represented to consciousness via "sensory input and the self-assembly of concepts" in the brain (Wilson, 1998, p.66). Despite formally exorcizing the free-floating Kantian 'subject' from the bodily machine, however, Wilson goes on to claim that "[t]he proper task of scientists is to diagnose and correct the misalignment" between "outer existence [and] its inner representation" (1998, p.66). As Toadvine (2009, pp.11-2) also notes, Wilson thus ascribes to natural science the privileged possibility of transcendent access to the mind-independent world which he otherwise denies to epistemic body-subjects—paradoxically, *including* scientists—because of their material implication in the causal structures of the world investigated. Given my warnings about the objectivistic and utilitarian commitments which pervade natural science, it should be relatively unsurprising to discover that Wilson ends up espousing a suspiciously univocal, mechanistic, and deterministic account of the more-than-human world from his paradoxically 'acosmic' standpoint.

What Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of Gestalt theory allows us to better appreciate, then, is that, by taking up naturalism's objectivistic heritage, one risks doing colonial violence to the more-than-human world by relatively uncritically extending the meanings available within a particular kind of Gestalt—meanings which are intimately related to the specific kinds of entities *we are*—to a world which might present different meanings to differently embodied entities, those with different intentional expectations, and so on. Moreover, if my previous contentions about the partisan intentional commitments behind natural science's totalizing schema are on the right lines, then the meanings which show up for natural scientists—like Uexküll's ticks—will be non-accidentally related to the asymmetric interests and projects which motivate their investigation of the more-than-human world in the first place.

Fully acknowledging the Gestalt-situatedness of our epistemological and ontological contentions appears to be incompatible with our default commitment to naturalism. Nonetheless, the solution to our quandary of how to uncover the *more-than*-human world on its own terms cannot be to deny access to it in the correlationist manner that a wholly consistent Kantianism might suggest. This sort of position is problematic in that *still* begins from the sort of subject/object schema under which more-than-human 'objects-in-themselves' must be either readily accessible (as in dogmatic naturalism) or foreclosed (substituted for a

realm of correlational objects-for-us). As I hope to have shown above, part of the problem with the supposition of this objectivistic schema lies in its misunderstanding of the perceptual phenomena on which it is based. Perception *ends*, rather than begins, with the determinate objects of its concern. The presumption of a primitive ontological realm of objects-in-themselves is, therefore, a misleading and unhelpful abstraction.

Merleau-Ponty thinks we should instead resituate our ontological and epistemological investigations within the context of the meaningful Gestalts which allow phenomena to stand out as they do. Merleau-Ponty intends to thereby disrupt the false dilemma between naturalism and correlationism which might otherwise preclude access to the more-than-human world on its own rich terms, and/or fail to take account of the commitments and assumptions which contribute to the physiognomy of the ‘objects’ revealed through perception. This becomes plausible because, in the Gestalt context, meaningful phenomena are *co-expressed* ambiguously *between* world and body-subject—be that a tick or a human being—and, therefore, not wholly beyond our reach. By resisting the fundamental separation of ‘subject’ from ‘object’, then, theory is “no longer Kantian” (N, p.169) in the problematic sense outlined above. Otherwise put: whilst acknowledging our Gestalt-situatedness makes it deeply problematic to grant a dogmatic or positivistic science a monopoly on ontological and epistemological matters (especially where we seek to reduce the violence we do to the more-than-human world), doing so needn’t cleave us from the more-than-human targets of our concern because of the ways that phenomena are instituted within this context.

In what follows, then, I will discuss Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the Gestalt, and its implications, as I see them, for our attempt to better address the more-than-human world on its own terms. By foregrounding the Gestalt-situatedness of our epistemological and ontological contentions, I hope to make possible several avenues of progress in addressing the submerged mass of our crisis situation. The first is straightforward: by understanding all (scientific) worldly engagements within the Gestalt structure rather than any derivative subject/object schema, Merleau-Ponty licences more positive, and less violent, ways to understand and relate to the more-than-human world. I contend that this benefit arises largely because these Gestalts legitimate a richer variety of ontologically real meanings, and associated means by which to relate to them, than might otherwise be admitted via natural scientific apparatuses. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, by contextualising *our own investigations* within certain kinds of Gestalt structures, Merleau-Ponty forces a radical mode of critical self-reflexivity about our imposition of onto-epistemological violence. Thus, I want to claim, disrupting the latent violence of our submerged mass becomes more plausible

through the radically-reflective mindset necessitated by taking seriously the Gestalt-situatedness of our reflective observations or theoretical contentions.

2.2.1 Embodiment and the Gestalt

Given that Gestalt theory is primarily a theory of perception, let's briefly recap on the flaws with the objectivistic accounts that led us to it. We saw that empiricism effectively reduces perception to passive receipt of the stimuli transmitted by the mechanical structures of one's body. Intellectualism reduces perception to intellectual judgement yet, insofar as it is intelligible, intellectualism requires the body to carry out much the same causal role to account for the 'sensations' it shares with empiricism at heart. Neither manifestation of objective thought grants any primary importance to perceptual *embodiment*; a debt Merleau-Ponty seeks to pay by embedding the embodied perceiver *within* the Gestalt.

Toadvine (2009) explains that Merleau-Ponty's concept of the Gestalt consists of three fundamental characteristics, none of which, independent of an antecedent commitment to the subject/object schema, requires limiting perceptual consciousness to humanoid body-subjects¹⁷:

1. There exists a dialectical or diacritical relationship between parts of the Gestalt and the whole.
2. There is a teleological element which constitutes normativity in the Gestalt.
3. There are degrees of complexity to which the Gestalt is made thematic and may be transposed.

We can best see how these characteristics play out through what Merleau-Ponty calls 'vital behaviour': an organism's environmental interaction. The first two are especially difficult to separate. To illustrate, Merleau-Ponty draws upon the biologist's observation that, by amending the rhythm of its ambulatory movement, a dung beetle can walk almost immediately after having a leg amputated. By re-organizing several elements (individual leg movement, rhythm of combined leg movement, whole body movement, and so on), through varying dialectics between (parts of) the organism and its environment, the beetle can achieve its own vital goal: to walk more effectively. There are, therefore, better and worse ways for the beetle

¹⁷ Like Plumwood, I use the term 'humanoid' (rather than just 'human') here to problematize any straightforward human/nonhuman binary which operates along the fault line of consciousness. Whilst some nonhuman entities (e.g. 'higher' primates) might possess thematising consciousnesses, there is no good reason to think that consciousness is limited to these somewhat humanoid determinations. See chapter four for more detail on these issues.

to respond to *its* milieu and the re-organization of various micro-level dialectical relationships can only really be understood in this overall teleological context.

We should pause to acknowledge that, in the example above, any such teleology is registered by situated human observers. Nonetheless, it cannot be entirely the product of human projection. The beetle's goal is rather a "norm enscribed in the facts themselves" (*SB* p.123), essential to understanding the beetle's functional re-organization and overall behavioural orientation. After all, independent of a prior commitment to objective thought, one needn't take the beetle to be mechanically responding to the mind-independent stimuli described by (an ideal) science, nor need one take the beetle's world to be entirely 'subjective' and, thus, foreclosed to us. In fact, neither of these explanations appears adequate to *make sense* of the observed phenomena. Like Uexküll's tick, Merleau-Ponty's dung beetle appears to be responding "to the meaning, the *sense*, presented to it by its situation, even though this meaning is not a conscious representation" (Toadvine, 2009, p.27). Phenomenologically speaking, this sort of meaning isn't problematic for us to appreciate, even though the beetle's goal, like the 'smell' of butyric acid, cannot show up for us in the same way it does for the animal in question. Acknowledging the normativity intrinsic to the beetle's Gestalt is important, however, because it allows us to appreciate the "directed activity between blind mechanism and intelligent behaviour which is not accounted for by classical mechanism and intellectualism" (*SB* p.40).

The third characteristic relates to the establishment of what is typical of these dialectical relationships such that an organism can transpose its meaning elsewhere; something that becomes very difficult for natural science to explain in lieu of any straightforward or linear causal explanation. Merleau-Ponty draws upon the observation that a cat which feeds itself by tugging a string with its paw, on the second attempt, often uses its teeth with greater success. This behaviour cannot be satisfactorily explained through the reflex arc because the cat's behaviour, like the beetle's, constitutes a "new aptitude for resolving a series of problems of the same form" (*SB*, p.96). It doesn't mechanically repeat gestures, given the repetition of qualitatively identical stimuli. We've already seen reason to believe that the cat's behaviour might, however, be better appreciated via reference to the diacritical features and embodied expectations generative of its specific field. To borrow Merleau-Ponty's imagery, then, even for cats and beetles, the meaning of each note within a given Gestalt is only to be found within the context of the symphonic whole. Like any symphony, however, the 'melodies' of a Gestalt may be transposed into a different key.

But why is this important for the task at hand? Merleau-Ponty's research suggests that the object/subject distinctions which underpin natural science (and which subsequently delineate our understanding of the environmental crisis) aren't just reflective abstractions, they have also been "badly made" (*SB*, p.10). Natural science typically precludes meaning from its account of ontological reality because, apparently unlike the world's more 'objective' furniture, meanings cannot be identified as positive things-in-themselves. However, the examples above problematize excluding meaning from the ontological realm. Meaning isn't so self-evidently subjective (or fictitious), given that an appreciation of contextual meaning appears to be required for us to appreciate tick or dung beetle behaviours (who nevertheless cannot plausibly be taken to thematise their worlds in the *same* manner as humanoid consciousnesses). But neither is meaning self-evidently reducible to, or emergent from, the allegedly determinate objects or properties described by natural science. As Merleau-Ponty's shipwreck and Uexküll's ticks neatly demonstrate, configuring these objects or properties *as* stimuli also requires the contribution of situated organisms within an overall Gestalt structure. Moreover, the more fundamental 'objectivity' of the world is also thrown into question, given that understanding vital behaviour requires not, as even Kuhn would have it, an understanding of *the* determinate physico-chemical properties or objects (bodies included), but an appreciation of the meanings which are inseparable from the vital milieu into which an organism is materially embedded. Finally, given the irreducible teleological normativity of Gestalts, perceptual acts and their resultant objects aren't 'objective' in the sense of being epistemically neutral or value-free, even for nonhuman animals. If so, then by investigating a reified realm of objects-in-themselves, natural science thereby violently excludes a richer and more diverse range of meanings from its investigations of the world than is legitimated by the perceptual phenomena themselves. If axiological value, for instance, cannot be entirely exorcised from insect, feline, or arachnid worlds without significant distortion, then there is no obvious reason why such meanings should be excluded from our investigation of the more-than-human world more broadly, nor from our renewed investigation of the entities and relationships which constitute our environmental crisis.

But by far the biggest ramifications concern how we understand *our* bodies' roles in configuring the meaningful entities which furnish our worlds, and which come to constitute explananda in our reflective accounts of them. Merleau-Ponty takes the examples above to show that, whilst mechanistic reflexes may exist as "a very special case of behaviour, observable under certain determined conditions" (*SB*, p.46), one cannot extrapolate totalizing explanations about reality from these genuinely exceptional events. In the Gestalt context, 'fundamental' physical laws can "have meaning only as a means of conceptualizing the perceived world"; they exist as "certain privileged perceptual structures", rather than

providing *the* privileged transcendental structures systematically constraining all ontological pronouncements (*SB*, pp.144-5). This observation is problematic for contemporary natural science, given that it seeks to provide exhaustive explanations of worldly events solely through determinate extensional properties linked via causal matrices¹⁸. Merleau-Ponty's examples suggest, however, that the specific composition of one's body and its modes of comportment into the world are intimately related to the more fundamental determination of any such phenomena in the first place. One cannot, therefore, unproblematically impose these explanatory structures from outside. The tick's 'objectification' of mammalian blood is irreducibly related to its material and functional organisation, for instance, as is the beetle's capacity to reorganise its limbs for better ambulatory movement. Similar conclusions are commonplace in the (bio-)enactivism literature¹⁹. Moreover, "even at the minimal cellular level", Darian Meacham writes, the "chemically necessary dynamics of the environment do not fully determine the dynamics of the internal milieu or the behaviour of the system" (Meacham, 2016, p.80). Meacham suggests, therefore, that even protein behaviours should be considered 'cognitive' in some sense that is nevertheless inseparable from the kind of material entity that the protein *is*.

But these revelations also give *us* something of a problem. They force us to recognise that, even for relatively simple organisms, one's basic *bodily* relationship with the rest of the world isn't straightforwardly causal, but irreducibly *intentional*. Understood as such, "subject" and "object" are "two 'abstract' moments of a unique structure" (*PP*, p.430), only subsequently individuated by reflective consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty, subject and object are *chiasmic* rather than atomic terms²⁰. Whilst this revelation is positive for our present groundwork insofar as it forces us to acknowledge a richer range of meaningful phenomena than might otherwise show up under naturalism's objectivistic remit, we must nevertheless emphasize that *our own* ontological and epistemological investigations and contentions cannot be wholly extracted from the Gestalt structures that we, as situated human theorists, inhabit. Whilst, as I noted above, this admission needn't entirely foreclose the more-than-human world from our investigations, it does mean that—apparently unlike the natural scientist—the

¹⁸ Like Helen Steward (2016), however, we should emphasize that even our best theories of physics (e.g. non-equilibrium thermodynamics) profess no official commitment to determinism (nor indeterminism). Commitment to determinism is probably metaphysical in a way that will never be shown to be true by science itself.

¹⁹ See Varela *et al* (1991), Clark (2008), or Thomson and Stapleton (2009).

²⁰ An optic chiasm is where optic nerves partially crossover in one's brain. Although the nerves aren't themselves photosensitive, their crossing-over is essential for binocular vision. Just as monocular vision is abstracted from binocular vision, Merleau-Ponty thinks 'subject' and 'object' are reflective abstractions from their ordinary co-constitutive expressive contexts. For Merleau-Ponty, *partial* encroachment between chiasmic poles, and not their juxtaposition or assimilation, is ontologically basic (*PP*, p.93; *VI*, pp.7-9; p.123; p.148).

ecophenomenological philosopher cannot hope to unproblematically take the meanings revealed in *their* phenomenology to be representative of the more-than-human world itself. Merleau-Ponty illustrates this point with the secret “sexual pantomime of the dog... [or] praying mantis” (*PP*, p.184), which a veterinarian, for example, might understand somewhat, but which evidently doesn’t show up for them in the *same* meaningful ways it does for the dog or praying mantis. Each differently situated party is here invested in somewhat divergent Gestalts and so do not address identical intentional objects at any level of description.

Thus, it seems that, if we’re to be critically self-reflexive about our conceptual colonialism, then any ecophenomenological groundwork must be deeply concerned with interrogating the intentional commitments and assumptions which generate the meanings we commonly perceive. Furthermore, given the irreducibility of the Gestalt, our metatheoretical task must be conducted from within the confines of the sorts of Gestalt structures available to human body-subjects. Nonetheless, I hope to show over the remainder of the chapter that this insoluble tension between the body-subject’s immanent participation within a certain Gestalt structure and her attempt to identify or narrate legitimate meanings which resonate beyond it is fruitful insofar as it forces a *radical* sort of critical self-reflexivity about our imposition of conceptual violence. It is the sort of critical self-reflexivity that the aforementioned tension necessitates which may serve to disrupt the colonial mindset characteristic of our submerged mass. This process can only get started, however, with a phenomenological exploration of how meanings emerge within human or humanoid perception. It is to this subject that we shall now turn.

2.2.2 Human Perception

We’ve seen Merleau-Ponty argue that perception is fundamentally intentional. Whilst he needn’t preclude nonhumans from partaking in similar relationships, Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl in distinguishing two types of intentionality in human perception: “intentionality of act, which is that of our judgements and of those occasions where we voluntarily take up a position” and “operative intentionality... which produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and our life, being apparent in our desires, our evaluations and in the landscape we see” (*PP*, p.xviii) ²¹. Merleau-Ponty argues that operative intentionality is the “condition of the former’s possibility” (*PP*, p.429). Act intentional judgements instantiate the ‘objective’ shape of the world, but these reflective judgements aren’t ‘free’ in the Cartesian sense because they are constrained by the normative meanings generated through one’s operative

²¹ Whilst Merleau-Ponty claims that the animal milieu is characterized by “the monotonous *a priori*s of need and instinct” and the human milieu by “use objects” and “cultural objects” (*SB* p.162), this rigid, anthropocentric cleavage is inessential to his broader argument. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty himself warns against restricting *types* of perception to types of organism (*SB*, p.104).

involvement within it. Carl Sachs notes that for the human as much as the dung beetle, then, operative intentionality lacks “aboutness: there is no distinct intentional *object* even notionally separable from the intentional *act* directed towards that object” (2014, p.105). This is because, whilst a body-subject’s functional or teleological orientation cannot be extracted from a state of affairs without distorting the phenomena available for expression, a body-subject needn’t aim at something *over and above* the way it reconfigures its leg movements, for instance. Even in the beetle’s case, however, operative intentionality maintains “directedness; it is the intentionality of purposive behaviour” (Sachs, 2014, p.105). Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty refuses to bifurcate intentionality and consciousness. Thus, operative intentionality *just is* pre-reflective consciousness.

If operative intentionality is generative of our worlds and our reflective accounts of them, one might wonder how the meanings that delineate those accounts are operatively garnered. Merleau-Ponty argues that bodily “motility” is “basic intentionality” in the sense that “[c]onsciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’” (PP, p.137). Like dung beetles or ticks, our perceptions of the world are intimately related to the structures of our bodies and the ways we typically comport them into it. Our bodies provide the normative background for any subsequent ontological and epistemological claims because entities gain their basic character from the intentional meanings they reveal as part of a phenomenal field. As the Gestalt psychologists’ experiments show, things are deep or shallow, ordered or disordered, inviting or repulsive, and are differentially coloured in relation our “our ways of inhabiting the world, and such inhabitation is always bodily in nature” (Cerbone, 2008, pp.128-9). Since the norms and idiosyncrasies of our bodies are structurally essential to our “being-in-the-world” then, for any Gestalt, “one’s own body is always the third term, always tacitly understood, in the figure-background structure” (PP, p.78; p.101).

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the most important role in all of this is played by what he calls the “*body schema*” (PP, p.98, translation altered)²². Taylor Carman describes the body schema as “the bodily skills and capacities that shape our awareness of objects”; it is through the body schema that “intentional content” is “sketched out in advance by the dispositions that allow things to appear to us as they do” (2005, pp.68-70). Crucially, as David Cerbone explains, through the body schema, “the integrity of perception is informed by, and founded on, the integrity of bodily self-experience” (2008, p.128). Take Merleau-Ponty’s example of a marble rolled between thumb and forefinger. The point at which each digit connects with

²² Smith’s translation conflates ‘body image’ and ‘body schema’: “‘body image’ refers to one’s conscious reflection on how they see their own bodies and the type that it is for them... Our ‘body schema’ on the other hand is tacit yet unreflective knowledge about our body, its movements, its generation of space—as being-in-the-world” (Mahendran, 2009, p.195f).

the object is one “that in purely sensory terms have nothing to do with one another” (Morris, 2008, pp.116-7). Merleau-Ponty argues, however, that the intentional relationship of the movement of both digits to its *anticipated* rolling affects the marble’s synthesis as a unified object. In doing so, the body schema also simultaneously reveals “the synthesis of one’s own body, it is the reply correlative to [the synthesis of the object], and it is literally the same thing to perceive one single marble, and to use two fingers as one single organ” (PP, p.205). Since the body more-or-less “presents itself as an expressive unity which we can learn to know only by taking it up, this structure will be passed on to the sensible world” (PP, p.205). The body schema, therefore, plays a central role in dictating the diacritical relationships between parts and whole which establish the meaningful Gestalt-objects that perception terminates in. “The theory of the body schema is”, therefore, “implicitly, a theory of perception” (PP, p.206), since it reveals to us the primary mode of intentionality through which world and self are *expressively* revealed.

Nonetheless, the above says nothing substantive about what it means for something to be ‘true’ in an operative context. Merleau-Ponty seeks to explain this notion with reference to how, in perceptual acts, we shift our bodies with the operative goal of gaining maximal grip on the world (PP, p.267):

My body is geared onto the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world. This maximum distinctness in perception and action points clearly to a perceptual *ground*, a basis of my life, a general setting in which my body can co-exist with the world.

(PP, p.250)

On Merleau-Ponty’s account, maximal grip is established through an embodied relation with the world’s meanings that requires minimal strain or instability on the part of the body-subject. Our embodied grasp of the phenomena in question thus provides unavoidable normative impetus for the reflective distinctions between ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’ that we subsequently draw. As Merleau-Ponty’s shipwreck example shows, however, perception doesn’t thereby become pejoratively ‘subjective’ because there remain “success conditions; one can always misperceive by failing to adhere to the relevant perceptual norm” (Sachs, 2014, p.109). For Merleau-Ponty, unlike his naturalistic rivals, however, ‘success’ cannot refer to whether one’s subjective representations correspond to the objects-in-themselves. Merleau-Ponty’s success conditions are *immanent* to the Gestalt in which those phenomena are expressed. In the shipwreck example, for instance, the true phenomena were ultimately determined when, once

the whole ship-object was instituted, each of its meaningful elements could wholly satisfy the body-subject's operative expectations in a manner they previously could not.

2.2.3 Sedimentation and Perception

If this were the whole story, however, we'd have difficulty accounting for the extent of the objectivistic prejudice manifested in our submerged mass. We've seen that Merleau-Ponty credits the experience error with perpetuating the presumption of objective thought. Nevertheless, given what Merleau-Ponty says about our irreducibly embodied grasp of the world's meanings, it seems unsatisfactory to attribute *the* source of our more markedly hierarchical or scientific prejudices to a basic psychological error. Whilst Merleau-Ponty provides compelling reason to link the experience error to our problematic preoccupation with the modality of the in-itself, the experience error alone doesn't explain why we take stipulative nonhuman objects to be ontologically *reducible* to the terms of fundamental physics, for example. If, as embodied, one is as intimately bound up into the world's meaningful fabric as Merleau-Ponty suggests, then the experience error provides an unsatisfactory explanation of the dominance of a scientific purview which more-or-less outright denies the reality of those meanings.

To make sense of these prejudices we need to appreciate that, for Merleau-Ponty, meaning generated through the body schema is influenced by the intentional *sediment* of one's situation. It is through the body schema, Merleau-Ponty argues, that consciousness is

subtended by an 'intentional arc' which projects round us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects. It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility. And it is this which 'goes limp' in illness.

(PP, p.136)

Through his appeal to the 'intentional arc', Merleau-Ponty asks us to reconfigure how we—under the influence of naturalism—ordinarily think about the bodily abilities that shape the intentional objects we grasp. Whilst the body schema affords perceptual syntheses of body and world, it isn't a closed economy (as proponents of the reflex arc contend). For Merleau-Ponty, "habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments" (PP, p.143). The intentional arc develops as experiential 'knowledge' from one's multifaceted situation is sedimented into unreflective bodily habits. These habits then "enrich and [normatively] recast the body schema" (PP, p.153). The line between operative and act intentionality becomes somewhat blurred here,

because there is bi-directional transfer of influence between the two. In this sense, “every habit is both motor and perceptual, because it lies... between explicit perception and actual movement, in the basic function which sets boundaries to our field of vision and our field of action” (*PP*, p.152). One’s embodied *expectations* change in relation to one’s goals, cultural history, social situation, and intersubjective experiences, and the habits in which these expectations are crystalized serve to shape the meaningful physiognomy of the entities we encounter. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “The gaze gets more or less from things according to the way in which it questions them, ranges over or dwells on them” (*PP*, p.153). How it does so will depend on which instruments it operatively acquires.

This suggestion isn’t as strange as it may seem. Stefano Micali (2013, pp.205-7), for example, notes that, despite possessing well-functioning physiological capacities, patients suffering from severe depression frequently report experiencing worlds which ostensibly lack geometric depth, and which possess curious olfactory qualities. These patients usually report either a reduced capacity to affectively ‘feel’ or distinguish smells and tastes, or they experience pervasive (usually repulsive) odours emanating from their bodies or world around them. What is particularly interesting about these cases is that what alters the meanings that the body-subject is habitually able to find in the world is not most fundamentally a change in her basic physiological structures, but a shift in how she relates to her body and how she subsequently comports herself into the world. For these patients, the aforementioned meanings appear to be intimately related to a phenomenal distance they have come to experience from their own bodies—perceived here more significantly as an object or burden—which leaves them disconnected from the affective resonances previously afforded by the world and Others therein.

However, the issue of sediment is more all-encompassing than Micali’s examples might suggest. We’ve already come across some rather banal cases where one’s thematic experience comes to shape the meanings available at an operative level. The veterinarian mentioned above may only identify the ‘canine sexual pantomime’ because the sediment of his training attunes him to the intentional salience of certain fine-grained movements, for instance. More importantly, as Sara Heinämaa emphasizes, for Merleau-Ponty, meaning is also the product of the sediment of our “intentional ancestors” in the sense that—insofar as one learns to perceive at all—one *always* takes up “an entire *tradition* of sensing and perceiving” (2009, p.282). Merleau-Ponty puts this point as follows:

My act of perception... takes advantage of work already done, of a general synthesis constituted once and for all, and this is what I mean when I say that I perceive with my body or my senses, since my body and my senses are precisely that familiarity with the world born

of habit, that implicit or sedimentary body of knowledge... The person who perceives is not spread out before himself as a consciousness must be; he has a historical density, he takes up a perceptual tradition and is faced with a present.

(*PP*, p.238)

These shared traditions, which we take up in their historicity, are essential to the intersubjective assent relations which help to shape one's grasp of the 'real'. Why? Because one simply can't take up reality on one's own; it is in the intersubjective world that "perspectives blend, perceptions confirm each other, a meaning emerges" (*PP*, p.xix).

Another illustration will prove helpful here. Linda Martín Alcoff (2006, pp.202-3) draws upon the psychologist Lawrence Hirschfeld's research which suggests that, when learning to perceive race, children are directed to emphasize certain types of visible features over others. Antecedent ontological commitments about 'natural kinds', therefore, largely determine which perceptual phenomena are ontologically realised as racial kinds. Children literally (though tacitly) *learn to see* certain meanings—contested racial ones in this case—as historically-situated, intersubjective norms dictate. What's particularly interesting about Hirschfeld's research, however, is that, whilst the children studied *really do* identify some ontologically real phenomena, their meanings are disambiguated largely by the sedimented social and political structures to which they are subjected. Moreover, since, for Hirschfeld's subjects, an oppressive racial politics *precedes* their capacity to grasp the 'objective' phenomena in question, then this problematic sort of sediment isn't wholly separable from the child's embodied grasp of the world at all. More worryingly, the politically-charged meanings made intersubjectively available also inform or dictate "appropriate modes of conduct" (2006, p.186) with members of the various naturalized racial kinds in ways that we, as irreducibly situated theorists ourselves, aren't always well-attuned to identify or problematize.

It's not hard to see how related sediment implicit in the intentional arc might have a bearing on our objectifying habits and the violent behaviours those habits may licence. The terms under which natural science subsumes the more-than-human world might be thought to be similarly "naïve" and "dishonest" to the natural kinds mentioned above insofar as they neglect or dismiss the practical and intersubjective entanglements which influence the scientist's judgements about the 'objective' phenomena (*PP*, p.ix). We explored some contentions to this extent with Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger in section 2.1.4. In both cases, this naivety or dishonesty is also problematic because the *metatheoretical* reification or naturalization of certain existential meanings (at the expense of others) isn't obviously up for discussion in any

revision of the theoretical boundaries which already rest, to some degree, upon those antecedent ontological commitments.

Whilst an appeal to sediment might contribute to a more plausible explanation of the more puzzlingly reductive or scientistic of our objectivistic predilections, the question is: what kind of sediment could serve to inculcate them? Husserl (1970) is surely right to suggest that natural science's track record of predictive successes is an important reason why the scientific method has become equated with rationality in a contemporary context. Brown (2003, p.7) is also surely right to claim that the reasons that we frequently equate the extensional realist apparatuses of contemporary science with the *a priori* demands of ontology have something to do with the categories Descartes inaugurated. Evernden (1993) and Merleau-Ponty (*PP*, pp.72f) make related (and credible) points about our economic histories. Nonetheless, at least to my mind, the explanations which predominate the (eco-)phenomenological literature lack some explanatory power regarding what exactly has continued to immunize a particular set of objectivistic metatheoretical assumptions from any significant revision over the past four hundred years or more. As I noted in my introductory chapter, however, I think that ecofeminists like Plumwood fare better on this score. Since this is the main topic of the next chapter, however, I shall defer further discussion of it until then.

2.3. Radical Reflection

This concession notwithstanding, by attempting to identify and problematize objectivistic sediment, ecophenomenologists expose a further issue: if reflection is inexorably tied to a historically situated epistemic standpoint then, in one sense, the question posed above becomes unanswerable without recourse to the sort of transcendence that is rendered implausible by acknowledgement of one's embodiment. Otherwise put: if our reductive default naturalism is symptomatic (and not merely the cause) of the sedimented ways that we typically objectify the world at level of embodied habit, then objective thought is more than a straightforward cognitive error; it infuses the ways that we're able to relate to the more-than-human world at an operative level. However, if objective thought is more fundamentally an error of *praxis*, then it—and, by extension, our submerged mass—becomes significantly more difficult to address.

If this is the context in which we find ourselves, then our ecophenomenological interrogation of the submerged mass of our crisis situation cannot be a wholly transcendental one either. If objectivistic sediment penetrates as deeply as our operative bond with the world, it is no longer unproblematic to simply usurp our default naturalism and ascribe to phenomena the meanings given in *our* phenomenological experiences instead. A naïve phenomenology of

this ilk would fail to fully address the role of sediment in establishing one's grasp of the world and any meanings therein. Thus, if the violence characteristic of our submerged mass is largely precipitated, as I've suggested, by a failure of critical self-reflexivity, then even a transcendental ecophenomenology appears to be somewhat problematically implicated in it. Our reflective task, then, cannot be to bracket all worldly engagements, but to attempt to slacken "the intentional threads which attach us to the world and [bring] them to our notice" (*PP*, p.xiii). It is ultimately in taking up this somewhat paradoxical task of *radical reflection* that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology will prove particularly useful in disrupting the violence of the environmental crisis.

2.3.1 The World in Reflection

The issue of sediment problematizes transcendental phenomenology. But all is not necessarily lost. For one thing, Merleau-Ponty insists that, as embodied, one's grasp of the world cannot be reduced to a (subjective) representation of it. One's interrogation of the meanings revealed in experience needn't also, therefore, be *wholly* constrained by sediment in the hopelessly constructivist manner that Vogel, for example, might insist.

To explain, it's important to emphasize that, as Merleau-Ponty's marble illustrates, the impetus the world provides is essential for us to dialogically express perceptual phenomena and establish our bodies as unities in their own right. The marble's meaningful physiognomy wasn't wholly constituted by the body-subject because the meanings ultimately available for expression were both licenced and limited by the world itself. To think otherwise would be to deny the intrinsic normativity of the world's own meanings and, thus, repeat the intellectualist's failure to provide any plausible account of the association of objects whatsoever. For Merleau-Ponty, "the world is not what I think but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible" (*PP*, pp.xvi-xvii). The grounds for communication become possible because, as body-subjects who are simultaneously both subject (*Leib*) and object (*Körper*), we are ontologically continuous with the rest of the world, which is "the setting of our own life, or our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue" (*PP*, p.283; p.320).

None of which is to say that one's grasp of marbles, for instance, cannot shift with the sediment of one's situation. One might become a marble connoisseur and learn to identify imperfections in them that were previously undetectable, for instance. But this isn't Merleau-Ponty's point. Our ability to grasp 'objects' *at all* is itself dependent on the basic intentional structures we *co-construct* with the world. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty thinks, "radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life which is

its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all” (*PP*, p.xiv). Since, Toadvine argues, the “body’s powers of expression are derivative from those of nature”, this “gives a new twist to the sense in which the body ‘sings the world’” (2009, p.60; *PP*, p.187). The first strand of radical reflection, therefore, emphasizes that one’s reflective dependency on pre-reflective experience must be, simultaneously, a dependency on the world with which one—as embodied—is “connatural” (*PP*, p.217)²³.

This is important. Although, as Sachs helps to illustrate, reflective consciousness will objectify in a manner not straightforwardly given at the operative level, and do so in a manner that reflects the sediment of a body-subject’s lifeworld, it can never be so constituted by these factors as to break from the world’s own meanings in the manner constructivists insist. To reiterate: this is because the operative intentional bond on which consciousness relies is, at base, conditioned *and* sustained by the world. If so, then there is no reason to think that the meanings which show up for us phenomenologically wholly misrepresent those licenced by the more-than-human world itself, nor that the success conditions immanent to the Gestalt can be of no assistance whatsoever in uncovering unwarranted or misleading sediment. There are, after all, qualitatively important distinctions available *within* perception that appear to justify the primacy of some meanings over others. For instance, Merleau-Ponty notes that

I cannot say that *I* see the blue of the sky in the same sense in which I say that I understand a book or again in which I decide to devote my life to mathematics... I can see blue because I am sensitive to colours, whereas... I am a mathematician because I have decided to be one.

(*PP*, p.215)

The sky’s *anonymous* phenomenal blueness is something which (unlike my account of a rainforest being reducible to lumber or energy flows) *I* have no real control over; not because this perception isn’t *mine*, but because the sky’s blueness appears to be *irresistibly* licenced by the world itself. Its phenomenological primacy is such that it just doesn’t feel open to revision, no matter how intensively I interrogate my experience in dialogue with the world.

But this phenomenological primacy needn’t be limited to simple meanings like colours. Since, as Brown argues, our everyday experience is infused with “moral sentiments that appear from a phenomenological perspective as instances of a prereflective axiological consciousness” (2003, p.10), then, independent of a prior commitment to the subject/object

²³ ‘Connaturality’ needn’t imply that meanings must be univocal or universal. Merleau-Ponty repeatedly insists that, as a matter of phenomenal primacy, one cannot *absorb* the differential meanings available to Others into one’s reflective consciousness (*PP*, p.42; p.62). This realisation is essential to his point about the canine sexual pantomime above.

schema, there is no obvious reason to think that *these* meanings must be less real than the sky's blueness. In fact, one may already be sympathetic to Brown's contention insofar as the demand for radical reflection in our present context is explicitly motivated by 'the sheer and simple fact of being struck by something wrong happening in the environment'. For Brown, "[v]alue experiences may be analysed as a form of intentional consciousness in which the phenomenon of valuing and something valued are given together" (2003, p.11). Just as anger may be noninferentially present *in* an expression, and love may be noninferentially present *in* a gift, where we suspend our sedimented intentional commitments sufficiently to be open to it, we might perceive the callousness, greed, or wrongness noninferentially manifested *in* concrete instances of deforestation, desertification, and anthropogenic climate change (*PP*, p.186; p.321).

It would be a mistake, however, to take the above to imply a relatively straightforward *reversibility* of meaning between those latent in the more-than-human world and those expressed by human body-subjects²⁴. Although pre-reflective dialogue with the world needn't navigate the distorting membrane of reflective consciousness, we've seen reason to believe that it is *always* coloured by habitual sediment, even at the operative level. Here is our dilemma: on the one hand, reflection manipulates the world's meanings "because the representations of such thinking inevitably change our basic experience by introducing categories and conceptual distinctions that were not originally given there" (Shusterman, 2005, p.167). It was the manifestation of this problem in objective thought which motivated a shift towards phenomenological methodology. On the other hand, however, the operative dialectic essential to express the world's meanings is so vulnerable to misleading and unwarranted sediment that to fail to reflect would be deeply problematic. If we're to attempt to return to the things themselves in earnest, then we need recourse to a second strand of radical reflection.

2.3.2 Reflection in the World

The first strand of radical reflection highlights the impossibility of establishing reflective conclusions that entirely transcend the intentional bond on which expression relies. Our second strand is also concerned with the situation taken up in reflection, but with a reverse focus on the role of sedimentation and reflective distortion in establishing pre-reflective meanings. This strand is principally defined by Merleau-Ponty's contention that reflection "is truly reflection only if it is not carried outside itself, only if it knows itself as reflection-on-an-

²⁴ As we shall see in chapter seven, the tendency to overstate reversibility is problematic in Merleau-Ponty's later work.

unreflective-experience, and consequently as a change in structure of our existence” (*PP*, p.62). I take this to mean two things: firstly, that our operative grasp of the world—to which reflection is ultimately tied—is necessarily manipulated by that thematic reflection; secondly, that in being carried out within itself, reflection will be shot through with the sediment of one’s multifaceted situation. Reflection can only hope to be *truly* radical when, as it reflects on its underlying meaningful phenomena, it addresses both concerns in its second-order reflection on itself.

But how is this possible, given Merleau-Ponty’s warnings that “none of [one’s] thoughts will be able to be quite detached from the historical context in which he lives”, and that “to be situated within a certain point of view necessarily involves not seeing that point of view” (*PP*, p.72f; *SB*, p.217)? I think we can elicit from Merleau-Ponty’s work a sense in which the real *radicalness* comes through embracing the somewhat paradoxical task taken up in an engaged and perpetual attempt to return to the more-than-human things themselves, without hope of success. Our second strand of radical reflection takes entirely seriously that, especially given our inescapably intersubjective means of grasping the world, one cannot hope to reflectively return to, or coincide with, any absolutely pre-sedimented, pre-reflective worldly bond. *That* is “a past which has never been a present” (*PP*, p.242). Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues, “[t]he most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (*PP*, p.xiv). A transcendental ecophenomenology of the early Husserlian ilk *is* impossible. But through our situated attempts to perpetually interrogate the objectivistic and utilitarian residue of our situation, for instance, we may inculcate a more positive *existential* phenomenology. In this existential ecophenomenological context, meanings—including any axiological ones—are uncovered only hyper-dialectically; they are “subject to continual reassessment in light of our subsequent experience, just as we continually reassess our previous understandings of the Real or the True” (Brown, 2003, p.11) as part of a critical social praxis²⁵.

We should be reminded that genuine *progress* becomes possible in radical reflection because of the intentional bond described above. Nonetheless, in the context of existential ecophenomenology, “perception is not presumed true, but defined as access to the truth”, and any provisional claims about the “real” must be tied to one’s “perception of the world upon which our idea of truth is forever based” (*PP*, p.xvi). Whilst we should not and cannot abandon our tacit affirmation of the world, we must retain a perpetual and radical sort of critical self-

²⁵ “Hyperdialectic” is Merleau-Ponty’s term for a dialectic which denies the possibility of a neat Hegelian synthesis because “every *thesis* is an idealization” (*VI*, pp.94-5). ‘Bad’ dialectics like Hegel’s err in ultimately understanding dialectical meanings apart from their partial, situated, and concrete configurations.

reflexivity with regards our claims about even the most basic meanings the world is taken to licence. In the present environmental context, then, I take real progress to arise, not solely from the metatheoretical revision of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ terms which Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology forces, but also from a more fundamental change in *how we relate to the world* demanded by an appreciation of how those terms arise in our phenomenologies. In short: I’m suggesting that a concerted attempt to address our submerged mass must come through a shift from objectification to radical reflection, *as a matter of praxis*.

So, what does this mean for the environmental crisis specifically? No matter how skilled an ecophenomenologist one is, one will never be able to straightforwardly or unproblematically uncover *the* fundamental or univocal pre-sedimentary meanings by which environmental ‘issues’ (e.g. depleting rainforests, polluted oceans, or collapsing ecosystems) should be understood. Nor will radical reflection itself straightforwardly reveal *the* (economic, technoscientific, or political) policies or maxims with which to ‘solve’ them. But, at least as understood in an existential ecophenomenological context, this just *isn’t* the primary role of the environmental philosopher. In fact, the demand that environmental philosophy *should* itself aim to achieve one or more of these goals is symptomatic of the totalizing philosophical tide which, insofar as they are radically-reflective, ecophenomenologists must swim against.

What ecophenomenological philosophy can do, however, is to help to inculcate a certain kind of *humility* by disrupting the totalizing, utilitarian, and objectivistic thinking which appears to precipitate those ‘issues’ in the first place. By taking up something akin to what Husserl called a “*habitus* of critique” (Husserl, cited in Miettinen, 2013, p.341), it seems that we might begin to disrupt our default colonial mindset and, thus, make progress in addressing the underlying violence of our crisis situation. Taken in this sense, environmental “philosophy does not consist of informing individuals on ‘what to do’ or ‘how to live’—rather... its task is that of motivation, the constant calling forth of critical self-inspection” (Miettinen, 2013, p.341). And that is why the critical environmental philosopher must be a ‘a place of unrest’. Unlike in the Hegelian sense of the term, however, there can be no hope of absolute synthesis without undermining the productive tension inherent to the paradox. “Hegel”, Merleau-Ponty tells us, “is the museum” (S, p.82).

2.4 Conclusions

This chapter has begun the groundwork for those to come. I began by challenging natural science’s claim to a monopoly on the basic ontological and epistemological terms under which the more-than-human world is characterized. I suggested that naturalism’s underpinning objectivistic assumptions and commitments distort the phenomenological data on which

natural science is based, and that these assumptions conceal utilitarian biases which licence problematically colonial ways of relating to the more-than-human world. Since these objectivistic purviews are directly implicated in the violence characteristic of our environmental crisis, I argued, then natural science should play a more limited role in determining the terms under which we understand and attempt to respond to it.

Taking the phenomenological underpinnings of our ontological and epistemological contentions more seriously, I argued, requires an attempt to return to the perceptual phenomena themselves. Over the remainder of the chapter, we explored the promise and limitations of Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology's ability to do so. We saw that the violence which natural science is apt to licence derives, in part, from science's tendency to mistake the Gestalt-objects which perception concludes in for the basic constituents of ontological reality. Through closer attention to the multifaceted Gestalt-situatedness in which our embodiment implicates us, we saw two ways that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology might prove useful in addressing this violence: firstly, by licencing a richer range of ontologically real phenomena than can be registered under the objectivistic remit of our default naturalism; secondly, by encouraging habitual critique of the ontological and epistemological terms we extend to more-than-human entities. Although, given our intractable immanence in the world investigated, the task of radical reflection is rendered somewhat paradoxical, I've suggested that this paradox may prove fruitful in the present *ecophenomenological* context insofar as it licences a certain humility via a shift in habitual praxis from objectification to one of critical self-reflexivity. Over the coming chapters, I will explore some more concrete (although necessarily provisional) suggestions about how such an ecophenomenological praxis might look.

Chapter 3: Ecofeminism and Ecophenomenology

In the previous chapter, we explored how Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology might inform our renewed investigation of the more-than-human world. I argued that ecophenomenology has some advantages over our default scientific naturalism because the basic metaphysical terms underpinning naturalism are reflective distortions of those given in our concrete phenomenological experience. By rejecting naturalism's objectivistic ontological presuppositions, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology also retains the capacity to acknowledge the epistemic salience of its own diacritical background and remain radically-reflective about its background commitments as a matter of praxis. Thus, I aimed to show, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is amenable to doing less conceptual violence to more-than-human entities than its naturalistic rivals. I also suggested that the behavioural violence which precipitates our crisis situation is intimately related to the sort of conceptual violence which a Merleau-Pontian approach helps to alleviate. If so, then a Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenological praxis shows significant promise in addressing the violence which underpins and perpetuates the environmental crisis.

In this chapter, I explore powerful intertwinings between ecophenomenology and ecofeminism which serve to support the role I claim for ecophenomenology. After outlining Val Plumwood's ecofeminism, I firstly contend that insights gleaned from ecofeminist thought can help ecophenomenologists to flesh out some of the unwarranted sediment implicit in objectivistic conceptions of the more-than-human world. Ecofeminists, I argue, help us further appreciate the dangerous falsity of taking objectivistic subject/object divisions to be metaphysically primitive by showing that these divisions are *politically* motivated in a manner that is set *specifically* against non-exploitative engagement with nonhuman entities. Nonetheless, I also argue that ecofeminist insights benefit from being reconfigured ecophenomenologically to address the curious lack of attention to embodiment which, contrary to their official commitments, appears to infuse the ecofeminist accounts I address²⁶. I finally argue that, by addressing dualistic assumptions as more-than-cognitive errors, a Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenological praxis has the potential to more effectively challenge the logic of domination that ecofeminists diagnose in objectivistic modes of revealing. Since ecofeminist insights may be successfully incorporated into an existential

²⁶ The task of reconciling Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology and ecofeminism is no unique project (see Jensen 2002, or Bannon, 2014). Where my project differs is that, for reasons identified in chapter seven, I resist situating any reconciliation within the ontology of the flesh.

ecophenomenological framework, I argue, this further supports adopting an ecophenomenological praxis to attend to the ‘submerged mass’ of our crisis situation.

3.1 Ecofeminism

Although the term ‘ecofeminism’ was probably coined by Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974, its roots go much deeper. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, claimed in 1949 that a common patriarchal logic sets women and nonhuman entities apart as pejoratively ‘other’ (Glazebrook, 2002, p.12; Beauvoir, 1954, p.114)²⁷. Ecofeminism is also a broad church. As I use the term here, ‘ecofeminism’ refers to a collection of theories and movements which hold that there exist *non-accidental* connections between the domination or exploitation of women, and of nonhuman entities. The variant of ecofeminism I’m concerned with in this chapter contends that exploitative behavioural patterns are underpinned by a common (but contingent) conceptual *logic*, which is overlooked or neutralised in ordinary discourse. Ecofeminism should be of interest to environmental theorists because, if ecofeminist arguments are successful, key tenets of our environmental crisis from anthropogenic climate change and overpopulation, to deforestation and water depletion result partly from the normative logic in which our conceptions of the more-than-human world are steeped. Addressing dualistic logic wholesale will, therefore, prove useful in addressing our crisis situation at root. Although forms of this narrower claim are common to most ecofeminist theories, I will now offer an outline of Plumwood’s contribution, since she offers arguably the most compelling version of it.

3.1.1 Plumwood’s Ecofeminism

Plumwood (1993; 2002) argues that the logic of dualism is so dominant, at least in ‘Western’ societies, that its ubiquity grants it a sort of invisibility as naturalized discourse²⁸. By

²⁷ The identification of an implicit patriarchal logic has a much longer history. Talia Welsh (2008, pp.47-51) notes that, throughout the *Sorbonne Lectures*, Merleau-Ponty himself contends that the ‘abnormal’ categorization of woman juxtaposed against the masculine ‘universal’ is the result of socio-historical sediment, which education is implicated in perpetuating.

²⁸ Despite her persistent use of this caveat, even Plumwood (e.g. 2006) acknowledges that we should be wary of confining dualistic thinking to the ‘West’. Given the contemporary paradigm of aggressive cultural imperialism, ‘Western culture’ (and, therefore, dualism) extends further than Plumwood consistently suggests. The global prevalence of (nominally) free-market capitalism—which appears to be non-accidentally related to dualism—testifies to this, as does the “globalization of western agricultural practices” (Glazebrook, 2002, p.18). Furthermore, even ‘non-Western’ traditions often couch *their* alleged nonanthropocentrism in terms of a suspiciously dualistic-sounding *synthesis* (e.g. Li, 1993, pp.275-8). Moreover, it is politically dangerous to romanticize ‘non-Western’ cultures as being beyond the grip of a ‘Western’ logic. Amartya Sen (1993), for instance, argues that “the Western conceptualization of India as mystical and ‘other’ [actually] serves the purposes of the fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party... who are busy rehashing history to serve the ends of their own political power” (Nussbaum, 2005, p.321f).

‘dualism’, Plumwood doesn’t mean to refer to the simple distinctions between conceptual pairs which may be thought of to some extent independently, and which we couldn’t do without in making sense of environmental theory (e.g. self/other or public/private). Dualisms exist where one side of the pair affirms its superiority over, and—most importantly—denial of dependency on, the other. Dualistic logic thereby entrenches a value-laden master/slave relationship which shapes *both* of its relata. Given that both ‘slave’ and ‘master’ identities emerge only in the context of a colonial relationship, dualistic logic is, Plumwood argues, inescapably tied to domination (1993, p.47). Under dualism, naturalized domination relations therefore delineate our accounts of ontological reality, our identities, the axiologically justified order of things, and so on.

Furthermore, Plumwood (2002) argues, since ‘Western’ culture is unequivocally driven by rationality, answers to the most pressing environmental ‘issues’ (what should we do about anthropogenic climate change? Should we value biodiversity? How should we mitigate habitat depletion?) are couched in rationalistic terms. The selection of what is considered ‘rational’, however, is itself undergirded by the same self-perpetuating, ideological schema. ‘Solutions’ to environmental ‘issues’, therefore, share the familiar problem of being couched in the same terms that are, in significant part, responsible for their arising in the first place. Genuinely liberating solutions to these problems can, Plumwood thinks, only come from unseating the entire dualistic system and the domination relations essential to it. Rationality will look very different afterwards. Attending to this task is Plumwood’s contribution to addressing our ‘submerged mass’.

3.1.2 Dualisms

According to Plumwood, a multitude of dualisms form a mutually-reinforcing, “interrelated set” (1993, p.42), which collectively serve to denigrate their underside. However, in this chapter, I will focus on only four: “subject/object”, “reason/nature”, “culture/nature”, and “male/female” (1993, p.43). To briefly illustrate how these dualisms operate, consider the relatively uncontroversial observation that an enduring source of women’s oppression derives from their identification with ‘mere’ (i.e. nonhuman) nature. This inherently pejorative identification usually appeals to a common ‘animality’ or reduction to immanence and, thus, allegedly limited intelligence or capacity for self-control. As Plumwood notes (1993, p.19), Plato, Bacon, Descartes, Hegel, and Burke all make this link more-or-less explicitly. But there is something even more sinister than patriarchy afoot. ‘Nature’ becomes a *political* category here insofar as it is *defined* antithetically to reason, culture, and other valuable aspects of

humanity²⁹. Dissociation of the valuable master side from ‘mere nature’ also then motivates the thought that the underside is something to be *overcome*.

Here are some examples to substantiate Plumwood’s claim: Plato (in-)famously thought the mutable, corporeal world to be useless in attaining knowledge of the ultimate reality. In the *Republic*, the bestial body (nature) must be dominated by reason if one is to attain knowledge (Plato, 1987). In Plato’s *Timaieus*, the ‘feminine’ is explicitly identified with the appetitive: the ‘lowest’ form of oneself that must be rationally suppressed if one is to flourish (Plato, 1965, p.71; Plumwood, 1993, pp.91-3). Francis Bacon—the founder of the modern scientific method—and his successors (notably Leibniz) notoriously took up the popular conception of nonhuman nature and women being equally reducible to their reproductive capacities to speak of the former as a separable feminine *object*. For Bacon, progress requires that the scientific inquisitor (a wholly-detached ‘man of reason’) *force* ‘nature’ to yield to his demands to ‘deliver’ her truths; truths which, despite Bacon’s use of violent terms like “vex” more commonly associated with torture, are allegedly passively received by their ‘impartial’ epistemological interrogator (see Merchant 1980, pp.172-8; 2006). We see a similar legacy taken up in Cartesian conceptions of the *res extensa* (object) investigated by the *res cogitans* (subject). In each case, ‘man’ (as shorthand for humanity) is defined in opposition to (nonhuman or non-rational) ‘nature’, with which woman is pejoratively identified. We must explore the dynamics of dualism, however, to see how dualism survives in subtler forms.

3.1.3 Dualistic Dynamics

(a) Backgrounding

According to Plumwood, dualisms are established through five interrelated dynamics. None of these creates, so much as magnifies or manipulates differences to reinforce the hierarchism which precipitates dualism’s colonial logic. ‘Backgrounding’ entirely denies the master’s dependency on the slave³⁰. This denial is, however, grossly misleading since, although master identities can be separately conceived, they are (as in Kojève’s Hegel) defined, conceptually,

²⁹ Plumwood’s point isn’t that specifically ‘male’ conceptions of reality enjoy privilege over ‘female’ ones. It is “the complex cultural identity of the master formed in the context of class, race, species and gender domination, which is at issue” (1993, p.5). Plumwood’s main target is a problematic sort of *logic*, not one of its many manifestations. Contrary to Warwick Fox’s critique, therefore, there is no essentiality about the alleged hierarchy or temporal priority of one kind of oppression over another (Fox, 1995; Plumwood, 1993, pp.30-1). Exposing dualistic logic may also, therefore, prove useful in tackling the denigration of other Others (e.g. ‘non-heterosexual’, or ‘non-white’ persons) in a manner that is consistent with (eco-)queer liberation strategies (see Gaard, 2015, p.27).

³⁰ This terminology is adopted from Marilyn Frye, who claims that “phallogocentric reality” reveals itself in the “ontological conversion” characteristic of “[t]he event of becoming a lesbian” (1983, p.167; p.171). Plumwood avoids the essentialism that Frye courts.

only relative to their domination of the slave. Moreover, “the master requires the other materially, in order to survive, for the relation of complementation has made the master dependent on the slave for fulfilment of his needs” (Plumwood, 1993, p.49). Even Bacon’s ‘man of reason’ is embodied. His rationality, therefore, presupposes his carnality and the material relationships with the more-than-human world on which his “hyperbolised” (Plumwood, 2002, p.17) autonomy depends. The backgrounded dependencies Plumwood has in mind are primarily appetitive or respiratory ones (there must be sufficient food to eat and air to breathe), but we might also include the Baconian interrogator’s subjection to the sort of ‘physical laws’ mentioned in the previous chapter which, as an embodied perceiver, delineate ‘his’ discoveries.

Backgrounding also has a social dimension. We’ve already explored how intersubjective relationships might shape our ontological and epistemological contentions in ways that we’re not primed to recognise. Ecofeminists, however, focus on how dualism provides *normative* political impetus to underplay our social dependencies in ways that prove deeply problematic for dualism’s underside. Ecofeminists frequently observe that identifying women with ‘mere nature’ means that women’s contributions to the achievements of ‘reason’ and ‘culture’ are characterized as passive or inessential. Socially reified ‘women’s labour’ (e.g. raising children or growing subsistence crops, rather than directly contributing to the formal economy), for instance, tends to be subsumed into the ‘nature’ category and so these essential agentic contributions to cultural accomplishments are overlooked or obscured. Dualism thus marks both women and nonhuman nature as the Lockean *terra nullius* on which valuable cultural capital is built (Plumwood, 1993, p.4).

Here is a salient example: Trish Glazebrook (2011) argues that backgrounding has hampered Ghanaian attempts to recover from flooding linked with near certainty to anthropogenic climate change. Under these conditions, food security is undermined and, given that around seventy percent of the world’s farmers are women (the percentage in Ghana is higher and most are subsistence farmers), the resultant problems affect women disproportionately. Tellingly, however, (inter-)governmental aid has focused on funding development strategies that elevate Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Doing so effectively means displacing or failing to compensate subsistence farmers, who don’t make a *directly* measurable impact on GDP. Even setting aside the dubious economic merit of these strategies, they present an obvious further issue. Women here are particularly vulnerable to negative effects of both the ‘issue’ (anthropogenic climate change), and what purports to be the ‘solution’ (technoscientific developmentalism), because of their place in the dualistic schema. The large-scale, mechanised monocultures pursued by even ‘green’ developmentalism do

systemic violence to women in much the same way (Glazebrook, 2002, p.17). Although an ‘invisibility’ for subsistence farmers permeates ongoing work to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, however, the 2010 “UN Framework Convention and Kyoto Protocol [still did] not identify women as a vulnerable group or as crucial actors in mitigation and adaptation efforts” (Glazebrook, 2011, p.774).

(b) Radical Exclusion

Backgrounding serves to establish a normative hierarchy. Through ‘radical exclusion’, the importance of differences between parties is amplified or mythologized to ‘hyperseparate’ master from slave, such that *he* is absolved of any significant continuity with *her*. Dualism achieves this largely via a “Differential Imperative” which seeks to establish identity as a matter of “kind not degree” (Rodman, cited in Plumwood, 1993, p.71; pp.50-1). Identities are radically divorced, often based on one (perhaps insignificant or distorted) property. Historically, radical exclusion has focused on the capacity for reason or ‘subjective’ consciousness which, for Descartes, becomes *man’s* essence. Radical exclusion may, however, operate more subtly to cleave master/slave orders. Women’s identities are still far more frequently tied to their reproductive capacities than men’s, for example. Likewise, Greta Gaard notes that “[i]n terms of radical exclusion, queers find that the erotic (a particularly perverse erotic) is projected onto queer sexuality to such a degree that this quality is seen as the only salient feature of queer identities” (1997, p.116).

Interestingly, given her contentions about the futility of developing an environmentally-focused rationality from within dualism, Plumwood also identifies a prevalent “neo-Cartesian” (2002, p.147) exclusionary tendency in contemporary animal ethics debates. This is evident through the exclusionary thresholds which Tom Regan (minimal subjectivity) and Peter Singer (sentience), for example, draw for inclusion to the moral sphere³¹. Plumwood argues that Singer and Regan err by extending moral considerability only to those nonhumans who demonstrate sufficient psychical continuity with human consciousnesses, rather than problematizing the master/slave dynamic which legitimates any such radically exclusionary mechanism. Thus, Plumwood argues, Singer and Regan’s ‘solutions’ to ‘issues’ of animal welfare are of very limited value in addressing the mindset responsible for our domination of the more-than-human world more broadly. For Plumwood, however, their limitations don’t straightforwardly derive from an unerring commitment to naturalism, but rather because

³¹ See Singer (1979) and Regan (1983).

Singer and Regan adhere to the same hierarchical *logic* which is apt to set ‘agent’ and ‘resource’, ‘mind’ and ‘nature’, or ‘subject’ and ‘object’ apart in kind.

To elaborate, imagine that, under Singer’s influence, we (somehow!) managed to establish a paradigm of near-global veganism. Doing so would probably impact positively on animal welfare, soil erosion, and carbon emissions. It would, however, leave remarkably untouched the more fundamentally utilitarian assumptions which legitimate enframing and relating to more-than-human entities *as* resources. Most obviously, this is because Singer refuses to grant nonsentient things (oysters, perhaps, but also abstract or composite entities like ‘biodiversity’, rainforests, or specific marine ecosystems) moral considerability in their own right. But the same sort of dynamic (via the related mechanisms of ‘instrumentalism’ and ‘homogenisation’ explored below) requires Singer to conceive of even sentient entities as ideally-calculable aggregates of utility which should be *substituted* (i.e. function as resources) for greater ones. For Singer, a legitimate, or even morally praiseworthy substitution may take place when, for example, heavy-use road infrastructure projects win out over the survival of rare great crested newt habitats (see Alaimo, 2017).

Radical exclusion’s faults don’t end there. Since radical exclusion denies the master’s manifold dependencies, it also demands a foundational atomism within our conceptual schemes. Dualism thereby implicitly naturalizes metaphysical presuppositions that, the experimental evidence suggests, are generally favoured by men (broadly, the empowered group), and which perpetuate themselves by skewing future ontological cross-referencing *against* recognition of relationality (Hintikka and Hintikka, 1983, p.146). By *beginning* from these anti-relational conceptual assumptions, dualism also skews the entities that even natural scientists can find in the world. This is because, under dualism, natural scientists (and, subsequently, naturalist philosophies) are largely beholden to the same basic concepts of essence, causality, and agency which structured the early modern worldview (Bannon, 2014, pp.35-6). Moreover, this purview dictates that ‘minds’ must also be cleaved from ‘nature’. Radical exclusion, therefore, demands much the same reflective purification of ‘object’ from ‘subject’ that proved so problematic in the previous chapter.

By understanding “unbridgeable” (Plumwood, 1993, p.51) qualities like the above to be definitive of the natural order of things, radical exclusion legitimates exploitative treatment of the more-than-human world for many of the same reasons identified in Heidegger’s analysis of technology. Dualism’s metatheoretical dynamics and structural assumptions ultimately *naturalize* colonial attitudes and relationships through the hierarchical and utilitarian terms they permit. Like Heidegger, Plumwood argues that our ontological and epistemological

contentions are as infected by these prejudices as our behaviours. But Plumwood also gives reason to be cautious of uncritically using the term ‘anthropocentrism’ to explain this problem, because that term itself courts a problematically exclusionary logic. Plumwood inadvertently thereby highlights some concerns we might have about contemporary Anthropocene rhetoric if we’re to address the environmental crisis that this ‘epoch’ allegedly foregrounds. I explore these in the next chapter.

(c) Incorporation

‘Incorporation’ further denigrates the underside by defining it *only* relative to the master. Incorporation makes the slave’s characteristics appear derivative, rather than acknowledging that master and slave share an “equally relational definition” (Plumwood, 1993, p.52). The master perspective thereby gains an air of anonymity or universality such that its contingency on illicit conceptual origins is lost. The slave, however, is always marked as ‘other’, usually *lacking* one or more of the master’s positive qualities. By entrenching political hierarchism as it does, the dynamic of incorporation ensures that, under dualism, one simply isn’t free to relate to more-than-human entities as equals; “the other is recognised only to the extent that it is assimilated to the self, or incorporated into the self and its systems of desires and needs: only as colonised by the self” (1993, p.52). Given that they admit nonhuman entities to the moral sphere solely via extension of certain qualities of humanoid experience, incorporative tendencies are as evident in the allegedly liberatory philosophies of Singer and Regan as they are in the more straightforwardly anthropocentric visions of Kant or Christine Korsgaard³². We shall see in the next chapter that qualities which problematize their respective placement in an incorporative schema are ordinarily backgrounded.

(d) Instrumentalism

The final two features are important corollaries to radical exclusion and incorporation. The first is ‘instrumentalism’, under which “the lower side is objectified, without ends of its own which demand consideration on their own account. Its ends are defined in terms of the master’s ends” (Plumwood, 1993, p.53). Instrumentalism affords the master perspective a certain privileged ‘neutrality’ which allows it alone to be valuable in its own right. To reprise an earlier example, instrumentalism helps to explain why subsistence farming (or, in a more familiar ‘Western’ paradigm, children’s education) is valued only to the extent that it contributes either to the formal economy or rationalistic ‘knowledge economy’.

³² Although Korsgaard (2004) thinks we should extend duties to nonhuman animals, their value is entirely conditional on *human* legislative wills.

Instrumentalism also appears to play a key role in licencing the ratiogenic violence done by reducing more-than-human entities to exchange-value under capitalism, and to standing reserve under technoscience³³. Plumwood (2002, p.16) goes further than Heidegger on this issue, however, by arguing that the impossibility of self-reflexivity within technoscience about its basic ontological and epistemological presuppositions is, ironically, *irrational* in a greater sense. This is because the unsustainable paradigm of consumption which technoscience perpetuates is arguably the largest determinant of behaviours which threaten the master's very survival (e.g. where anthropogenic desertification makes the Earth inhospitable to growing grain). Although instrumentalism ordinarily presents master/slave relationships as somehow mutually beneficial, this is one way that dualism may clearly be bad for *both* of its relata.

We should nonetheless emphasize that, regarding the state of affairs we designate as the 'environmental crisis', things are much worse for some than others. The effects of anthropogenic climate change, for example, are suffered more acutely by groups marked as 'other'. Plumwood gives the example that people who cannot afford to migrate or install air conditioning are at much greater risk of dying when temperatures rise (like in the 1995 Chicago heat wave) than their more affluent contemporaries (2002, p.84). Nancy Tuana (2007, pp.207-8) notes, via reflections on the unequal death toll of Hurricane Katrina, that the co-causal relationship between disability and poverty means that the economic and material barriers to migration are inflated with disastrous consequences. Gaard (2015, p.23) notes that rural desertification in developing countries also affects women more significantly than men because, given the instrumentalism of 'women's labour', women in these communities are much more likely to starve so that male family members may eat. Indeed, The International Union for Conservation of Nature estimates that "women and children are 14 times more likely to die in ecological disasters than men" (Gaard, 2015, p.23). The reality behind this statistic suggests an intimate link to dualistic logic. Women are often confined to households, they find it difficult to escape given the burden of carrying children (which men do not typically share),

³³ Capitalism is also implicated in backgrounding. For Carolyn Merchant (1989, p.233), the rise of capitalism was pivotal in hyperseparating production (masculine) from reproduction (feminine); a division we see perpetuated in 'gendered' employment roles. Likewise, Plumwood (2002, p.24) argues that the capitalist market is 'freed' only through its hyperbolic disembodiment from ecological and social dependencies and, thus, is facilitated, if not necessarily inaugurated, by dualistic logic. For illustration, think of the connections between histories of human slavery and contemporary positions of economic bargaining power. The economic legacies of slavery (e.g. enforced reliance on monocultures) put pressure on poorer nations to weaken, or turn a blind eye to, expensive environmental constraints so that they may participate in a global marketplace. The push to do so persists even where the results are disastrous, particularly for the poorest. Similar issues pervade the market of international emissions 'trading'. Vandana Shiva (1991) argues that this shouldn't surprise us given that, through *their* dualistic identification with 'mere nature', 'non-Western' labourers usually suffer worse fates than women in 'Western' nations.

they are reluctant to leave because of the (statistically well-justified) fear of being raped, and so on. Examples abound.

(e) Homogenisation

‘Homogenisation’ further denigrates the underside by refusing to recognise salient differences within any group that ‘deviates’ from the occupied centre. The underside are particularly vulnerable to homogenisation, Plumwood thinks, “because they lack the power to require recognition in their diversity” (2002, p.103). Homogenisation also licences substitutability by denying the particularity of members of a ‘universal’ class and, therefore, facilitates the master/other dichotomy essential to the other mechanisms (Plumwood, 1993, pp.53-54). To illustrate, Plumwood (1993, p.54) points to Marilyn Frye’s contention that the ‘natural order’ of dominion gains plausibility by reifying two sharply demarcated sexes with homogenous features shared by *all* their members. Even setting aside the fact that this picture fails to track people who identify as transsexual and so on, the sort of biological essentialism on which it relies is problematized by the available scientific data. A recent study by Brown University, for instance, was unable to estimate the frequency of intersex births, because the result depended on what one took to be the biological marker(s) of human sex (Blackless *et al.*, 2000). The study proposed seventeen potential categories, in which the estimated frequency ranged from one in 100 to one in 150,000 births. The nonhuman picture is at least as ambiguous. In solely genetic terms, some species of fungi have over 36,000 sexes (Arthur, 1999).

Homogenisation is also more subtly manifested in contemporary eco-holistic environmental philosophies like Callicott’s. Guided by the best ecological science available to him, Callicott (1989, p.109) understands ecosystemic entities to be fundamentally reducible to energy flows. For Callicott, ‘objects’ (including individual animals) possess less ontological reality than their anonymous components, which, for Callicott, are exactly the sort of ideally-calculable energy reserves that we problematized in the previous chapter. By establishing this ontological hierarchy, Karen Warren (2000, p.155) argues, Callicott effectively licences the in-principle substitutability of *any* macro-level entity (e.g. subsystem, wolf cub, cete of badgers) for the sake of the composite ecosystem which they form. We should, however, emphasize that Warren’s criticism differs subtly from the related one advanced in the previous chapter. Her objection isn’t *solely* that Callicott’s ontological and axiological contentions are restricted by the problematically reductive and utilitarian terms he inherits from ecological science. Nor (I suspect, wrongly) does Warren think that Callicott’s naturalism is problematic because it requires him to address the modality of the in-itself. Her main objection is that the scientific determinations which Callicott inherits and their subsequent axiological extensions

are determined not, most fundamentally, by the empirical evidence, but by the colonial *political* dynamics of a dualistic conceptual scheme. In fact, I take *this* claim to more-or-less exemplify the overall objection that ecofeminists pose to the ways we presently conceptualise environmental ‘issues’ and ‘solutions’: dualism provides the ‘common sense’ basis which underpins *any* (scientific, political, or philosophical) understanding of the way things are and should be, but only in the Gramscian sense, where ‘common sense’ means ‘sedimented hegemony’ (Gramsci, 1971).

The question of how to respond to dualism, however, is a tricky one. Historically, feminists have often taken two equally unsatisfactory approaches. The first is to argue that the (unjustified) cleavage drawn between men and women doesn’t parallel the (justified) cleavage between, say, human culture and ‘mere nature’. This approach was taken by liberal feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft (1995) and, arguably, Beauvoir (1952). The other approach is to embrace an essential differentiation which, some such theorists hold, puts women in a better position to address environmental issues than their male counterparts. This approach was taken by early ecofeminists like Ariel Salleh (1984). One central problem with both approaches is that, by enacting relatively uncritical reversals of the dualistic schema, they risk colluding with the colonial logic which establishes master/slave identities in the first place³⁴. By leaving dualistic logic significantly intact, an uncritical reversal strategy remains hostile to non-exploitative relationships with the more-than-human world. Plumwood argues that addressing our submerged mass, therefore, requires wholesale disruption of the distortion of difference that demands an attitude of domination from the outset. In chapter four we shall explore how an ecophenomenology informed by ecofeminist insights might begin this task. But first, in this chapter, we should tie up some loose ends concerning the appropriate way to

³⁴ Difference feminists aren’t necessarily committed to uncritical reversal strategies, since they usually problematize the mind/nature cleavage. This is true of Irigaray, who nevertheless faces some tricky questions about the essentialism she takes up (see Stone, 2003). Identifying ecofeminism with *early* ecofeminism is one source of the (mistaken, but persistent) charge that *all* ecofeminism is biologically or descriptively essentialist (e.g. Morton, 2010). This charge is also lodged because ecofeminists must allegedly begin from a concrete male/female binary to establish their critique. However, since ecofeminists needn’t claim that dualistic terms track reality-in-itself, this charge is also misdirected. The question about how then to identify subordinated groups (as ecofeminists must) without courting a problematic essentialism is tricky to answer. Nevertheless, two considerations mitigate the difficulty: firstly, that although the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ may be politically useful, dualism aside, there needn’t be a *clear* line of demarcation between the two, nor need there be only two sexes; secondly, that dualistic master/slave distinctions may revolve around any number of identifiable features which, Alison Stone (2008, p.155) notes, really do happen to cluster. People who identify as women often *tend* to be breasted and share hormonal similarities, for example, but these features needn’t be essential to the radically exclusive, ‘universal’ clustering required by dualism. Nor do these features need to have the exaggerated definitional importance dualistic logic ascribes to them. Since, under dualism, the markings of people’s bodies are non-accidentally related to their oppression, Stone (2008) argues, ‘women’ will probably also share significant overlaps in the genealogy of situation in which they take up their ‘womanhood’. How women live their bodies within that situation may, therefore, afford sufficient family resemblances to form an intelligible political group.

understand the relationship between these theoretical perspectives. We will do so by first exploring some fruitful intertwinings between ecophenomenology and ecofeminism.

3.2 Intertwinings

3.2.1 Objectivistic Sediment

In the previous chapter, we focused on how our default scientific naturalism is problematic because it is inconsistent with its underlying phenomenological data and its justification rests on objectivistic ontological assumptions that Merleau-Ponty tells compellingly against. Ecofeminism's first important contribution to our groundwork project is to allow us to better appreciate the sediment which precipitates these persistent objectivistic commitments.

I noted in my introductory chapter that the pervasive tendency to wholly bifurcate subject and object orders can be traced back at least as far as modernity. However, unlike Susan Bordo (1987), Plumwood resists the temptation to make Descartes or his contemporaries the *inaugurators* of dualism³⁵. One reason for doing so is that, by appreciating its logical and political precedent, we're better able to understand why the moderns subsumed the more-than-human world under the reductive terms that they commonly did. If the logic of dualism is inherently one of domination, then their hyperseparation of mind from nature becomes more understandable. Dualism is, after all, facilitated by a polarising dynamic which is set against appreciating one's physicality or material relationality from the outset. It's further plausible that Descartes and his successors' ability to 'clearly and distinctly' imagine the substantial separation of mind (*qua* subject) and body (*qua* object) is legitimated largely by the dualistic metatheoretical assumptions that they inherit³⁶.

Ecofeminists also thereby help to explain why our objectivistic stipulations survive the formal demise of pre-critical metaphysics. I noted in the previous chapter that, whilst the experience error might motivate the naturalist's presumption of a world furnished with determinate objects or properties-in-themselves, it wouldn't straightforwardly legitimate the more reductive or utilitarian terms under which we take contemporary physics, for instance,

³⁵ Although it makes sense to speak of genealogies of oppression in which we can point to concrete, pivotal moments (unlike Plumwood, 1993; Merchant, 1989; or Bordo, 1987), I resist the temptation to provide a historical account of the *birth* of dualism. As Merleau-Ponty teaches us in the *Phenomenology*, the project of 'transcending history' to provide an exhaustive account of a movement's *causal* origins is mistaken. The pressing issue is how to identify and challenge dualism from *within* our situation.

³⁶ Barry Dainton (2008, p.5) observes that we perpetuate such intuitions through the stories about princes and frogs 'switching bodies' we tell children before they're able to scrutinize the conceptually-laden language they inherit.

to exhaust ontological (or at least empirical) reality. Plumwood (1993, p.120), however, cashes out some of the sediment involved in grasping the world in this manner. The pervasive tendency to address the mind/body problem in abstraction from its socio-historical context leads, Plumwood thinks, to misleading and self-perpetuating analyses whereby important metatheoretical assumptions are glossed over in the theoretical revisions they licence. By neglecting the colonial logic which does some important background work in establishing the metaphysical plausibility of Cartesian or Baconian ‘objects’, subsequent revisions are bound to inherit similarly dualistic *political* assumptions to their forebears. Where Plumwood differs substantively from Brown on this score is in her suggestion that our ongoing failure to address the Cartesian precedent is motivated, in part, by a political undercurrent which surreptitiously informs what subsequent revisions *should* show.

Plumwood also thus helps us to understand why the prevalent challenge to substance dualism in the philosophy of mind, for instance, comes not from quarters that challenge the essential properties by which sides are characterized, nor those that problematize hyperseparational logic, but through variants of physicalism³⁷. Since physicalism more-or-less affirms one side of the subject/object dualism, however, Cartesian essentialism is largely sustained through extensional realist metaphysics³⁸. This has the ostensibly positive result that natural science and philosophy may then coincide in a manner which contradicts Stephen Hawking’s claim that “philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge” (Hawking and Mlodinow, 2010, p.13). The problem with physicalism’s “*truncated reversal*” (Plumwood, 1993, p.121) of the Cartesian schema, however, is that physicalism re-establishes a familiarly impoverished concept of the ‘physical’; one which actively prohibits non-exploitative means of relating to the more-than-human world because of the utilitarian and instrumentalist terms it permits.

Ecofeminism has further merit in explaining the political motivations for continuing to understand the metaphysics of scientific investigation as we do. I’ve argued that even Kuhnian natural science retains a somewhat Baconian paradigm under which a distinct epistemic subject investigates an ideally-purifiable object. If my previous arguments hold, the scientist must take himself to be (as Bacon also claims) epistemically *passive* in a fundamental sense because even intellectualists require the receipt of objective stimuli to pass reflective judgement on the world as it allegedly is *in-itself* (at least in an empirically real sense).

³⁷ See Lewis (1966) or Dennett (1993), for instance.

³⁸ Exceptions come from contemporary panpsychists (e.g. Strawson, 2006), who broadly accept that physicalism exhausts reality, yet aim to retain the ontological irreducibility of consciousness from within this paradigm. I address some problems with panpsychism in chapter four.

However, the violent metaphors Bacon employs to describe scientific methodology reveal more than he intends here. This is because, like Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, Plumwood provides reason to believe that the metaphysical supposition of a purifiable order of ‘objects’ can only really be maintained where *one imposes* restrictive and exclusionary experimental apparatuses and conditions onto the world. Under the logic of dualism, however, retaining Baconian subject/object relations makes perfect sense, since, in the name of domination—which here takes the form of *totalizing* knowledge—the aforementioned logical dynamics legitimate the atomic independence of parties and, therefore, licence the hyperseparation essential to the paradigm. If central ecofeminist arguments hold, however, the parameters of this paradigm reflect the interests or distorted (e.g. hyperbolically autonomous) identity of the master. Naturalism is thus led to court (as Merleau-Ponty also claims) a disembodied, but not disinterested, logocentrism.

Ultimately, for Plumwood, the subject/object dualism which effects the requisite metaphysical distance to licence transcendent or transcendental accounts of the ‘objective world’ amounts to an epistemic analogue of the person/property dualism (2002, p.41). Positions which employ (truncated reversals of) this dualism are, she claims, therefore predisposed to commodify the more-than-human world from the outset. This is because objectivistic schemas aren’t *just* metaphysically problematic (as Merleau-Ponty shows), they are also politically problematic because, under dualistic logic, ‘objects’ are also simultaneously underside. How this plays out in our dominant forms of naturalism is in terms of a ‘subject’ who may *possess* the ‘objective world’ and what are, purportedly, ‘its’ truths, due to the limited terms under which the world is subsumed. If the “passification of the objectified is”, as Plumwood (2002, p.46) writes, “a prelude to their instrumentalisation”, then attending to the violence of our submerged mass appears to require remedying our default naturalism and the dualistic sediment which underwrites it.

These conclusions might appear too quick. After all, as Karen Barad (2007, pp.125-6) notes, the representationalist separation of ‘objects’ from mediated perception—and, thus, the reduced plausibility of their epistemological *possession*—is a widespread feature of both realism and social constructivism in contemporary science and science studies debates. However, as Barad also notes, in that case, the only real ground for debate between scientific realism and constructivism is whether one’s ‘subjective’ representations may correspond with a distinct world-in-itself or are culturally determined. Both positions still hyperseparate human ‘culture’ (the ‘subjective’ representation) from nonhuman ‘nature’ (the represented ‘object’) in a manner that Merleau-Ponty and Plumwood think is a problematic reflective distortion. Both options also remain dualistic insofar as they rely on the same old *hierarchical*

subject/object divisions under which the former is agentic and active and the latter inert and plastic. Moreover, given their common metaphysical presuppositions, scientific realism and constructivism both ultimately slip back into the same sort of colonial mindset which underwrites the Baconian account: either the world-in-itself *can be exhausted* by the ‘appropriately attentive’ observer, or else (as was the case for Cronon and Vogel) the world *is effectively exhausted* by discourse.

The residual metaphysical picture is evidently hostile to nonhuman agency, alterity, and so on from the outset because, whilst the epistemological goalposts may have shifted, the problematically objectivistic ontological terms available for extension to nonhuman entities remain significantly intact. They remain intact for the familiar reason that, at least insofar as it makes substantive claims about the *more-than-human* world, natural science retains little appreciation of the situated experiential fields in which its basic terms are actively configured and only subsequently reified as trans-historical, acosmic, or ‘objective’. Barad puts this sort of concern as follows:

We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because ‘we’ *are* of the world... The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse.

(Barad, 2007, p.147)³⁹

None of which is to say that objectivistic ontologies can have *no* sphere of justification. Jane Bennett argues that where our survival is fundamentally dependent on action-oriented philosophies, there are good practical reasons to temporarily adopt the instrumentalist stance that the subject/object dualism motivates. It is, however, “also dangerous and counterproductive to live this fiction all the time (as Nietzsche and Bergson also note), and neither does it conduce to the formation of a ‘greener’ sensibility” (Bennett, 2010, p.xiv). Objectivistic schemas fail to motivate a ‘greener sensibility’ because they licence colonial violence against the more-than-human world. But Bennett’s claim also resonates with Evernden’s: although an objectivistic stance may have action-oriented merit in *extraordinary* circumstances, it *ordinarily* prevents critical self-reflexivity about how our everyday commitments and attitudes might precipitate our crisis situation. We might also be reminded

³⁹ Barad herself ontologizes Niels Bohr’s quantum mechanics and so understands the disambiguation of phenomena to be the world’s own differential becoming. However, Barad errs by reifying the basic terms of quantum physics in a transcendent manner that Bohr had already problematized (see Calvert-Minor, 2013).

of Plumwood's contention that human survival may *rely* on mitigating the consumeristic behaviours licenced by exactly the sort of objectivistic framework that Bennett mentions.

3.2.2 Fact/Value Dualism

Like many ecophenomenologists, most ecofeminists also think that the hyperseparation of facts and values is an objectivistic fiction which is implicated our commodification of the more-than-human world. For ecofeminists, this is primarily because the background against which 'facts' emerge is normatively structured by dualistic dynamics and metatheoretical assumptions. Ecofeminists thereby provide further reason not to uncritically take up the basic epistemological and ontological terms of naturalism, because the natural science which informs it lacks the value-neutrality it appears to maintain. Plumwood (2002, pp.43-4) goes so far as to accuse (what Kuhn might call) 'normal science' of being the pinnacle of masculine rationalism. She does so because its privileged axiomatic terms present the viewpoint of the occupied centre as if acosmic. "Disengagement and neutrality", Plumwood writes, are "as mythological in science as in the market" (2002, p.41).

It will be helpful to illustrate Plumwood's point. Beginning in the sixties, an influential movement in the philosophy of science led by Isaac Levi proposed that scientists should adopt common "canons of scientific inference" (i.e. the 'epistemic values' of parsimony, explanatory power, and the like) to determine the appropriate relationships between evidence and hypotheses (Levi, 1960, p.345; Steel, 2010). Levi's cabal (which would later include Kuhn) sought to ensure that the science *itself* could satisfy the previously unarticulated (but widely accepted) demand to remain free of 'non-epistemic' values, despite the inferential limitations arising from its empirical methodology. Whilst Levi's epistemic values surely have an important role to play in good science, however, (chiefly feminist) philosophers of science have observed that their demands can often be satisfied equally well by rival hypotheses which employ the same evidence. The Quine-Duhem thesis holds this to be because scientists are historically situated actors whose hypotheses are *always* underdetermined by the available evidence, and so the science *itself* cannot fully arbitrate the plausibility of hypotheses (see Duhem, 1982; Glazebrook, 2005). Merleau-Ponty makes a related point when he contends that "science takes part in history, even nature, and so is not its correlate" (N, p.269).

According to this line of argument, the relative feasibility of hypotheses is determined largely by the scientist's auxiliary assumptions. Haraway (1989) argues, for instance, that predominant understandings of primate behaviour gain traction through masculine narratives which understand human evolution in terms of the violent taming of the nonhuman environment (which is essentialized and valorised). One of Levi's own canonical pseudo-

values is the demand for parsimony, which has historically been pivotal in justifying extensional realist reductions of the more-than-human world. However, as Plumwood's account demonstrates, it can only do so when married with auxiliary (i.e. objectivistic and dualistic) assumptions about the phenomena under discussion, and where other plausible values—like regard for ontological *heterogeneity*—are ignored (see Longino, 1996, pp.45-7). The failure of Levi's paradigm supports Plumwood's (2002, p.38) argument that (as Heidegger has also suggested) to separate technoscience into application (technology=bad) and theory (science=good) doesn't do justice to the epistemic reality. Nor does it foster critical reflexivity about the assumptions and commitments which underwrite the science itself⁴⁰.

It's important to emphasize, however, that Plumwood's objection to science's alleged value-neutrality goes further than exposing its falsehood. Plumwood questions the value of a disengaged science, should it even be possible. Following Theresa Brennan, she contends that a "sado-dispassionate" science is problematic insofar as it licences "ratiogenic domination" of the more-than-human world (2002, p.41). The ideal of social and ethical disengagement creates a "commitment vacuum" in science which, she claims, undermines its "ability to resist its cooption by economic forces and works systematically against a science committed to social responsibility" (2002, p.41).

We should disambiguate two strands in Plumwood's objection. The first is straightforward: a disengaged science cannot *itself* be socially responsible. Science thus retains an "excess of objectivity" that is "adaptable to partisan politics, rather than enabling wise decision-making" (Sarewitz, cited in Glazebrook, 2005, p.79). A disengaged science can inform us about the volume of crude oil in shale beds, or potential crop yields, but it has nothing to say about the axiological merit of pesticide-intensive agriculture or fracking. Even an 'ideal' science can, therefore, have only a *regrettably* minimal role to play (i.e. by providing 'dispassionate evidence'), in addressing our colonial relationships with the more-than-human world.

Plumwood's second misgiving is more significant: under a sado-dispassionate model (as Levi apparently recognised), social and ethical values allegedly external to the science ultimately dictate the shape of scientific research. At least under dualism, she notes, economic rationality dictates that research which is sufficiently well-funded to get underway is determined largely by instrumental concerns for further research funding, or other economic 'goods' (Plumwood, 2002, p.40). Viable science must ordinarily produce economically useful results, and these results become 'the available science'. Things get worse when we realise that only the results of 'successful' trials (i.e. research which yields its sponsor's intended

⁴⁰ See Douglas (2016) for an excellent overview.

result) are routinely published (Douglas, 2016, p.624). Plumwood cites evidence from Canadian marine science which, until cod fishing collapsed in the nineties due to overexploitation, focused almost exclusively on establishing that ‘production’ was taking place at ‘safe’ levels. Around the same time, Canadian attempts to investigate the impact of overfishing on marine ecosystems were frustrated by a lack of government or corporate funding. Likewise, Hugh Lacey (2005) worries about the unequal resources allocated to develop genetically-modified organisms for large-scale agribusiness over the investigation of smaller-scale, lower-impact alternatives. If, under dualism, even a sado-dispassionate science is bound to bequeath us a world skewed towards economic goals, then it is (as we’ve seen Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger claim, for related reasons) further problematic to take even an ideal science to straightforwardly arbitrate the distinction of ‘real’ from ‘unreal’ without reference to the background field against which any such reality is inaugurated.

Nevertheless, the ‘failure’ of normal scientific objectivity isn’t all bad news. For ecofeminists, Bannon explains, “the divide between ontology and ethics erodes” (2014, p.6) in a manner that speaks to our present concern. By resisting a basic commitment to the extensional realist boundary conditions which scientific naturalism typically sets for ontological and epistemological enquiry, ecofeminist theory is made compatible with recognising a richer range of phenomena (including axiological ones) *within* the more-than-human world itself. Independent of a prior commitment to a subject/object dualism under which each nonhuman entity must be an “intentional nullity, never itself... active in disclosing knowledge” (Plumwood, 2002, p.45), there is no obvious reason to think that such meanings are (fallacious) constructions or projections contained *entirely* within the (human) subject. Ecofeminists are, after all, deeply suspicious of the alleged neutrality of the “raw, ‘pure’ observational data” (Plumwood, 2002, p.43) which would allow the scientist to say otherwise. All of this is, of course, theoretically consistent with Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology. Plumwood, however, highlights a pervasive *androcentric* politics in naturalism that we must be radically reflective about if we’re to avoid reinscribing it via any ‘meanings’ we invoke.

Plumwood’s overall objection to our dominant paradigm of naturalism lies in its demand for epistemological impartiality in the name of ‘objectivity’. For Plumwood, given that it is principally the metatheoretical demands of hegemonic dualism which dictate the shape of any such ‘impartiality’ or ‘objectivity’, scientific ‘disengagement’ is as politically engaged as anything else. The requirement to return to acts of understanding and knowing as ones with which one is always practically and intersubjectively engaged, and deeply invested, represents another point of convergence between Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology and ecofeminism. A bone of contention arises, however, regarding how to reconfigure ontology and

epistemology considering this revelation. Plumwood's answer is typical amongst ecofeminists. She contends that ontology and epistemology should become the preserve of "dialogical", "self-reflective", and "non-reductionist" forms of science (2002, p.53). Merleau-Ponty, however, holds that natural science (in any guise) cannot exhaust either ontology or epistemology, because it is problematically limited by objectivistic metaphysical presuppositions at a more fundamental level. It is to this issue that we should now turn.

3.3 Problems with Plumwood's Naturalism

3.3.1 Naturalism and Alterity

The problems Plumwood identifies with our dominant philosophical and scientific paradigms result from their ongoing failure to address the hegemonic sediment inherent in the basic (meta-)theoretical terms they employ. Insofar as they operate within a naturalized paradigm of dualistic logic, Plumwood and other ecofeminists think, natural science and philosophy are doomed to reinforce hierarchical and exploitative means of understanding and relating to the more-than-human world. If so, then the ecofeminists' identification of a dualistic logic which underpins the establishment of those terms will further help us to tackle our environmental crisis at root. Nevertheless, in mind of our earlier investigation of the relationships between our ontological contentions and phenomenological experience, there remains a potential tension. Although ecofeminists typically disavow objectivistic *conceptual* schemes, they frequently frame their critical analyses and subsequent prescriptions within 'suitably-modified' naturalistic frameworks⁴¹. Since, as I argued in chapter two, naturalism—as a manifestation of objective thought—is both phenomenologically suspect and hostile to (nonhuman) alterity from the outset, then we should have grave concerns about naturalism's ability to do the work that Plumwood and other ecofeminists ask of it.

To explain: Plumwood is set against dualistic subject/object relations as monological "conceptual frameworks" (2002, p.41), and not the metaphysical distinction between perceiver and world-in-itself which naturalists retain. For Plumwood, both poles are intrinsically relational, but there are ways that the latter simply *is*, and which may be conceptually *misrepresented*. We see one such misrepresentation in the Baconian subject's denial of his material relationality, for instance. For Plumwood, dualistic logic's main threat lies in its capacity to licence certain androcentric *misrepresentations* of the way the world-in-

⁴¹ Some ecofeminists *do* reject metaphysical naturalism. Trish Glazebrook (forthcoming) and Gail Stenstad (2002; 2011), for instance, both draw heavily upon Heideggerian phenomenology. For reasons previously stated, however, I think that a Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology bears more promise for the task in hand.

itself *really* is. Plumwood, therefore, prescribes what she calls a “progressive naturalism” (2001) to address the commitment vacuum which is filled by hegemonic ideology when epistemic ‘disengagement’ is promoted in science.

Given that epistemic disengagement is mythical, what is ‘progressive’ about Plumwood’s naturalism is twofold. Firstly, she wishes to reinstate “emotional”, “bodily”, and “political” aspects of reality which have been inappropriately excluded under the sado-dispassionate model (largely because of their alleged ‘subjectivity’) (2002, p.42). Doing so, Plumwood thinks, requires allowing relations of engagement such as care or respect, to function as sound foundations of knowledge relationships. These modes of epistemic engagement allow previously backgrounded meanings to show *themselves* to be irreducibly real. Plumwood thus offers an “ethico-epistemological proposition... that knowledges that do injustice to those who are known do not provide accurate or ethically appropriate forms of knowledge” (2002, p.44).

Secondly, Plumwood prescribes acknowledging ‘subject-subject’ relationships whereby perceiver and perceived become dialogical epistemic interlocutors. Doing so, Plumwood thinks, will open the appropriately engaged scientist to “awe and wonder” (2002, p.50) in a manner rendered impossible under scientific naturalism’s instrumentalist stance. The subject/object dualism entails the “closure of the knower to the known, for the knower... can change the other to make it conform to desire but... cannot be themselves changed by the other” (2002, p.42). A progressive naturalism, however, aims to take seriously the thought that more-than-human entities perceived aren’t objects to be *possessed* under antecedent human concepts. It takes knowledge constitution to be a more-or-less reciprocal dialogue between entities which seeks to provide the means to better address things on their own, rich, terms.

However, we should have concerns about progressive naturalism’s ability to achieve this goal. One such concern arises through Merleau-Ponty’s observation that our phenomenal worlds exist as diacritically-interrelated wholes. As Merleau-Ponty’s shipwreck neatly illustrates, to alter the diacritics is to alter a whole field’s meanings; it is to become “in truth another world” (*PP*. pp.16-7). Plumwood cannot obviously do justice to these insights because, by appealing to the modality of the in-itself, even a progressive naturalism must take ontologically real properties to be essentially separate from, or antecedent to, perception. This remains true for Plumwood, even where properties are relational. Where a human ‘subject’ *really* has kinship ties with a certain geographical feature (i.e. to a nonhuman ‘subject’), as indigenous peoples often report, for instance, Plumwood still describes these phenomena without any reference to the contribution of the (curiously *de*-)situated investigator (1993,

p.182). Plumwood thinks that the world's truths are dialogically *revealed to* human interlocutors, rather than *expressed between* body-subjects and world. Thus, Plumwood's naturalism is, as Merleau-Ponty has shown, phenomenologically suspect.

But this isn't our major problem. That comes with the *consequences* of situating perceptual worlds within the modality of the in-itself. Plumwood and Merleau-Ponty agree that recognising the irreducible situatedness of perception is essential to any plausible analysis of the ontological, epistemological, or axiological claims subsequently derived from it. Both emphasize that this admission speaks against suppressing "the limits and social shaping of knowledge imposed by the knower's identity and their cultural or political 'slant'" (Plumwood, 2002, p.43). Doing so, for both, means accepting the impossibility of transcendent or transcendental disengagement from the world. For both, knowledge is at least partly constructed, rather than a simple reflective clarification of passively received sensations. Given these shared commitments, an obvious question concerns how to deal with any anthropomorphism which arises from that situated "human conceptual location" (Plumwood, 2002, p.57). This is where Plumwood's problems really begin.

Plumwood accepts that "[a]ny representation of speech-content for a human audience will have to be an interpretation in terms of human concepts, and in that weak sense, a background level of anthropomorphism is always likely to be present" (2002, p.57). But Plumwood's language is revealing. She evidently takes the world differentially *represented* by human and nonhuman entities to be *the same* world-in-itself. This is an implication of the brand of metaphysical realism permitted by her naturalism. However, Plumwood herself thereby risks 'closing the knower to the known' by more-or-less extending the basic physiognomic structures of a reality grasped by human body-subjects to all nonhuman 'subjects'. At one point, Plumwood even speaks about the intersubjective experience of encountering a snake by a pool as one of "conscious sharing and recognition of states of mind"; a claim that doesn't sit entirely easily with her contention that "recognition of the other" acts as a "limit on the self and as an independent centre of resistance and opacity" (1993, p.157). Where one takes conceptual location seriously, what Plumwood seems to think will differ is the specific way in which one *cognizes* the communication offered by the Other. The issue is, as it was for Kuhn, about how one conceives *the* world communicated, rather than about how that world is more basically intentionally constituted.

If so, then Plumwood's claim that progressive naturalism rehabilitates naturalism's backgrounding of 'bodily' aspects of reality also becomes vulnerable. Plumwood apparently neglects to fully recognise that one's ontological and epistemological claims cannot entirely

transcend the intentional grasp generated by one's bodily structures, since they are one's very means of having a world in the first place. The 'thing' that shows up in perception, Merleau-Ponty argues, "can never be actually in itself because its articulations are those of our very existence" (*PP*, p.146; p.320). By attempting to address the modality of the in-itself, however, Plumwood seems, contrary to her own inclinations, to attempt to transcend her embodiment and, thus, backgrounds the intentional contributions her bodily situation makes to *any* stipulative world investigated. The result for progressive naturalism is that, whilst nonhuman Others might be dialogically engaged, any 'dialogue' takes place within the framework established by human body-subjects and is conducted on largely humanoid terms.

Now, whilst Plumwood is right that anthropomorphism doesn't entail anthropocentrism, neither are these charges entirely unrelated. Where anthropomorphism does violence to nonhuman Others through a basic hostility to their *alterity*, it prevents more positive ways to understand and relate to the more-than-human world. By denying nonhuman Others such as the snake the possibility of substantially different intentional realities from the outset, Plumwood seems to flatten ontology in a problematically anthropomorphic (and, ultimately, anthropocentric) sense, which delineates the 'truths' and 'meanings' available in any dialogue with them. After all, do Plumwood and the snake really "have a shared basis of understanding and expectation" (1993, p.157) *at the level of world-constitution*?

To clarify the root of the problem, it's important to appreciate that Plumwood's call for trans-species subject-subject relationships arises in the context of Sandra Harding's call to turn to disempowered groups to detect androcentric bias in science. But the cases aren't strictly analogous. Women can contest their objectification without experiencing *insurmountable* barriers to communication about the phenomena up for grabs because, as *homo sapiens* sharing significant bodily similarities, women and men will share similar enough worlds. However, this isn't obviously true of more significantly dissimilar entities like dung beetles, saplings, or ticks, which plausibly inhabit *radically different* (if not always entirely inaccessible) worlds. In a revealing passage, Plumwood claims that progressive naturalism should aim to emulate the subject-subject approach of anthropology, where "highly articulate 'subjects of study'... speak of how and under what conditions they would wish to be studied as subjects" (1993, p.54). Most nonhuman entities, however, don't obviously possess the communicative rationality to 'speak' in the requisite manner. If they did—say, to correct our 'misrepresentations' of them—especially, given the residual role of objective thought in Plumwood's naturalism, it's not clear we could address their contributions on their own terms.

One might respond in two ways. One might contend that progressive naturalism *does* permit substantially different intentional realities because, through the terms of engagement demanded by subject-subject dialogue, we're always open to surprise by how the more-than-human world reveals *itself*. Given that Plumwood's naturalism is motivated by openness to alterity, a tree or tick's intentional bond with the world, for instance, needn't be uncritically derived from the scientist's in the requisite sense to licence a charge of anthropomorphic incorporation or assimilation. The trouble with this response, however, is that naturalism's in-principle limitation of intentional realities is still too stringent. Whilst there may be a degree of difference in how something configures the world, this cannot apply in any substantive manner to the stipulative world-in-itself in which any configurations take place. We explored this sort of problem in chapter two, where we showed that, if the lowest level of reduction is the Gestalt, then one cannot situate the Gestalt naturalistically without paradox (see *SB*, pp.143-4).

Alternatively, one might argue that the charge of anthropomorphism is overdrawn, given the ontological continuity that, like Merleau-Ponty, Plumwood emphasizes between worldly entities. As human, one is also a primate, a vertebrate, and so on, so these continuities must influence the common contours of the ontological reality we inhabit (Plumwood, 2002, p.133). On Plumwood's account, as I understand it, one is implicated in the world of a dung beetle or sapling in much the same way that a European is somewhat implicated in the epistemic perspective of an indigenous Amazonian (albeit perhaps to a lesser degree). Plumwood argues that there can, therefore, be no hard-and-fast rule about the blanket illegitimacy of cross-species *representation* (2002, p.60).

As I suggested briefly in the previous chapter, I think Plumwood *is* on the right lines in arguing that carnal connaturality *does* facilitate the possibility of engaging with nonhuman Others—in their alterity—to a degree. This thought will garner importance over the next three chapters. Nevertheless, insofar as Plumwood remains wedded to a naturalist purview, any cross-species 'representations' must still take place *within* the same world-in-itself that is more fundamentally instituted by a particular kind of situated body-subject. How, as embodied, one co-constructs one's world (and only subsequently thematises it) isn't really up for discussion in Plumwood's work, or if it is, it stands in tension with her naturalism. Thus, through her basic commitment to the ontological presuppositions licenced by objective thought, even Plumwood fails to fully appreciate the implications of the fact that theory is irreducibly situated.

Other attempts to rehabilitate progressive naturalism fall into much the same trap. According to the version of ‘hierarchy theory’ Warren (2000) adopts from ecological science, for instance, naturalism’s problems can be mitigated because naturalism is at least compatible with the claim that “[t]here is no ontologically prior... ecological description of nature” (2000, p.155). Warren thinks that Callicott errs by refusing to admit the ontological irreducibility of entities discovered at different trophic levels and spatio-temporal scales. Different “observation sets” (Warren, 2000, p.149) call for different apparatuses and yield different phenomena but, since the various phenomena discovered (e.g. dynamic ecosystems or subsystems, individual organisms, or holistic energy flows) are strictly *impossible*, none is more ontologically ‘fundamental’ than the others. Warren’s approach *intends*, therefore, to take more seriously the situated and partial openings from which ontological and epistemological claims are gleaned. Nonetheless, the issue remains that hierarchy theory remains problematically totalizing. Insofar as it is naturalistic, hierarchy theory still relies on a singular, ‘objective’ way the (‘wholly determinable’, ‘mind-independent’) world *is* in-itself, albeit at a certain spatio-temporal scale and trophic level (and thus doesn’t straightforwardly ‘admit of only a single correct description’). In this respect, like Plumwood, Warren makes little progress on Kuhn’s objectivistic model. We need something more radical.

I don’t mean to suggest that ecofeminist attempts to address dualism from within naturalism aren’t eminently useful. Plumwood certainly helps to construct “more generous and helpful” (2002, p.54) narratives than are available through reductionist (techno-)science. Furthermore, by anthropomorphizing nonhuman entities, she provides a politically useful “counter story” (Plumwood, 2001, p.31) to Cartesian mechanism. In an age of rampant consumerism, these devices have importance in stalling our instrumentalist tendencies and turning our attention towards our submerged mass. What I do want to suggest, however, is that Plumwood’s commitment to naturalism ultimately hampers her attempt to do justice to the thought that “[i]n the context of the ratiogenic complicity of science in over-exploitation, self-critical forms [of knowledge] are surely what we need” (2002, p.44). A commitment to naturalism limits critical self-reflexivity about the limited range of intentional objects and sedimented meanings already implicit in one’s basic grasp of the world. In fact, by making the world-in-itself a *common object* of perception, Plumwood courts some of the colonial sediment she employs progressive naturalism to disrupt. In short: I’m suggesting that, ecofeminism’s many virtues notwithstanding, by adopting a naturalist purview, ecofeminists unnecessarily limit the possibility of a praxis of wholly *radical* reflection and the equally radical stance of humility that may motivate.

3.3.2 Dualism as a More-than-Cognitive Error

To recap: I've suggested that, insofar as ecofeminists are committed to a naturalistic metaphysical framework, they must view dualism as more-or-less a *cognitive* error; a misleading *conceptual* scheme which licences exploitative *misrepresentations* of the more-than-human world. Within this naturalistic purview, the shift of scientific paradigm allegedly required to disrupt dualism must be understood in a similar manner to Kuhn's. Since the world *itself* apparently doesn't change with a shift in our account of it, we just need to develop better ways (i.e. via non-exploitative conceptual frameworks) to perceive and theorize the world. That is what progressive naturalism is charged with doing. However, the problem with this sort of account is that, by reifying the basic ontological entities subsequently accessed by scientists, like Kuhn, Plumwood legitimates the sort of transcendent or transcendental perspective which ecofeminists rightly distance themselves from.

Ecophenomenologists needn't make the same error. Nonetheless, their rejection of transcendental ontology comes at a cost. For Merleau-Ponty, it means that one's grasp of the world is *always* infused with the surreptitious sediment of one's situation. That changes how we must think about the sort of sediment Plumwood foregrounds. In dualistic societies, for instance, Merleau-Ponty would surely admit that dualistic sediment will saturate the intersubjective and operative background which generates the meaningful physiognomy our intentional objects possess. Merleau-Ponty thereby exposes the true extent of the problem and the challenge that addressing it presents, because dualistic logic does not *refer* to the world we experience, it is (at least in 'the West') *ontologically inseparable* from that world.

Given Plumwood's attention to 'backgrounding' it initially seems a strange oversight that she, like other ecofeminists, doesn't understand dualism to be an existent thing *within* the world itself rather than our cognitive attitudes towards it. However, according to the metaphysics of presence which objective thought serves to establish within naturalism, admitting the *real* existence of something like dualism is tantamount to making it a genuine feature of the world-in-itself and, therefore, (erroneously) *naturalizing* it. One might follow Merleau-Ponty here in thinking that this issue emerges out of the failure, again, to recognise the primacy of meaning *co-expressed* between chiasmic parties, within a Gestalt-structure.

But why is the metaphysical status of dualistic logic important for our present concern? If, as ecofeminists should surely agree, we habitually grasp the world in somewhat dualistic ways, then it's not obvious that dualism can be satisfactorily disrupted by cognitive means in the manner that Plumwood suggests. The ecophenomenologist Erazim Kohák, for example, argues that attempting to reflectively bracket our instrumentalist prejudices will "prove futile"

because “[t]hough we bracket the construct of ‘nature’ as a mechanical system and the human as the sole source of meaning, our urban experience will lead us right back to it” (1984, p.23). What Kohák means is that, as body-subjects already embedded in an intersubjective lifeworld overlaid with dualistic and objectivistic meanings at an operative level, we already relate to that world in a colonial manner as a matter of *praxis*. And we have probably more-or-less always done so. Piecemeal moments of reflective clarity, therefore, are extremely unlikely to disrupt our ordinary, colonial, ways of being-in-the-world. A related concern leads Alcoff to ask, rhetorically, “if identity prejudice operates via a collective imaginary, as [Miranda Fricker] suggests, through associated images and relatively unconscious connotations, can a successful antidote operate entirely as a conscious practice? Will volitional reflexivity, in other words, be sufficient to counteract a non-volitional prejudice?” (2010, p.132).

Recent experimental research on implicit bias substantiates Alcoff and Kohák’s concerns. One of its most important findings is that “simply trying very hard to be unbiased... will do nothing to combat either implicit bias or stereotype threat. In fact, research shows that this may *increase* implicit bias” (Stewart and Payne, cited in Saul, 2013, p.50). Given Plumwood’s scepticism about ‘Western’ logocentrism’s ability to reconfigure rationality, this revelation shouldn’t be entirely surprising. Nevertheless, it allows us to see the limitations of Plumwood’s naturalistic purview for bringing about radical change; a limitation which Plumwood gets very close to admitting when she says that “[r]ationalist influence makes philosophers treat centrism as if it were a matter of cognition... Centrism is tested by behaviour rather than avowal” (2002, pp.98-9). Nevertheless, Plumwood still advocates “studying up” (i.e. making -centric logic conspicuous to theory) as *the* method by which to address dualism. We shall explore alternative means in chapter four, but it will suffice to say for now, with Merleau-Ponty, that if dualistic or objectivistic assumptions are ingrained, more-than-cognitive errors, then our means of addressing them must also be more-than-cognitive, because substantive change must come through a more fundamental shift in *praxis*.

By retaining the problematic theoretical kernels identified above, Plumwood, like many ecofeminists, is prevented from making entirely good on her claim to avoid “a new narrative of dominance that mimics and parallels the old, failing to imagine with sufficient daring the identities and relationships the original narrative created” (2001, p.8). Nevertheless, I see no *in-principle* reason why Plumwood’s insights couldn’t be resituated phenomenologically⁴².

⁴² I explore reasons feminist philosophers have been wary of phenomenology in chapter six.

3.4 Conclusions

Ecofeminists helpfully foreground some of the hegemonic metatheoretical sediment which may imbue our problematically objectivistic ways of revealing the world. Moreover, since the dualistic logic seemingly enshrined in our default scientific naturalism is inherently exploitative, Plumwood, in particular, helps to clarify why the terms it licences are markedly problematic for our ongoing relationships with the *more-than-human* world. Ecofeminists also help to emphasize that any analysis of pressing environmental ‘issues’ and their corresponding ‘solutions’ must address the colonial logic which underwrites them. Ecophenomenologists and ecofeminists are, therefore, united in their commitment to the groundwork required to interrogate the assumptions and commitments constitutive our submerged mass. However, many ecofeminists are somewhat limited in their capacity to do so insofar as they are constrained by objectivistic metaphysical stipulations at a more fundamental level. Nevertheless, given their significant intertwinings, ecofeminist and ecophenomenological approaches appear to be *prima facie* reconcilable in a manner that speaks in favour of reconfiguring the insights of the former into the praxis of the latter. What we shall explore in the next chapter is how such a praxis might attend to the aforementioned objectivistic underpinnings of our environmental crisis.

Chapter 4: Seeing Better

I've hitherto argued that certain objectivistic commitments significantly underpin the violent behaviours responsible for our crisis situation. From Merleau-Ponty, we've seen good reason to believe that the objectivistic metaphysical assumptions of our default naturalism limit our capacity to appreciate the more-than-human world on its own, rich, terms. This is because naturalism—as a manifestation of 'objective thought'—requires or presupposes transcendent or transcendental access to the modality of the in-itself. Naturalism, therefore, lacks the capacity for sufficient critical self-reflexivity about the irreducible intentional contribution of one's situated and embodied grasp to the physiognomy of any world taken up. Given its narrow metaphysical remit, scientific naturalism is also problematically limited in the reductive terms that it can admit to the more-than-human 'objects' which furnish any such world. We've seen ecofeminists like Val Plumwood identify further problems with the terms natural scientists ordinarily extend to the more-than-human world, because those terms are largely underwritten by the sediment of a colonial logic which sets humans (*qua* subject) and nonhumans (*qua* object) apart in kind. Thus, according to the line of argument I've been pursuing, not only are more-than-human 'objects' misconstrued to be metaphysically distinct entities, the reductive terms ordinarily imposed on them are implicated in their continued exploitation.

I've also suggested that tackling the problematic imposition of ontological and epistemological violence outlined above requires the sort of *radical* reflection that can best be facilitated by rethinking our environmental crisis and its constituent aspects ecophenomenologically. Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology shows particular promise for our task since it retains an account of the embodied habituality of perception, without requiring that perceptual habits be understood mechanically or deterministically. Thus, as I aimed to show in chapter two, there is a meaningful sense in which the radically-reflective Merleau-Pontian body-subject might literally *learn* to perceive better. For Merleau-Ponty, one perceives *better* where one more accurately expresses the more-than-human world's meanings, without requiring that any such expression reflectively coincide with any (problematically objectivistic) world-in-itself. Since, on Merleau-Ponty's account, new habits may be sedimented into one's basic, embodied grasp of the world, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology offers promise that one might come to both perceive *and* relate to the world in more positive (and less objectivistic) ways at the level of *praxis*.

In this chapter, I want to explore how Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology might provide resources to facilitate the task above. The chapter is split into three sections. The first explores

how an ecophenomenology informed by ecofeminist (and new materialist) insights might foreground subject-object *continuities* as correctives to the problematic dualism manifested in scientific naturalism. Doing so will help us to attend to our ‘submerged mass’ by disrupting the tendencies towards possessing and controlling the more-than-human world—in both conceptual and behavioural senses—that a subject/object dualism ordinarily legitimates. In the second section, I explore how insights from the first speak in favour of adopting a new non-reductive onto-epistemological norm. The details will come later, but my basic argument is as follows: if the naturalistic supposition of ontologically primitive ‘subject’ and ‘object’ poles rests on erroneous (meta-)theoretical assumptions, then we should reject any correspondence theory of truth which relies on those assumptions. Since the world may, plausibly, be taken up under heterogenous schemes of description without individually exhausting the meanings available for expression, then it seems we should replace the naturalist’s totalizing ‘God’s Eye View’ with the ‘*view-from-everywhere*’. That is, the sum of all meaningful expressions of the world, *including nonhuman ones*. In the final section, I entertain some suggestions about how one might inculcate *habits* that facilitate the sustained possibility of seeing better. In doing so, I explore the roles of attention and, particularly, hesitancy—conceived as affective openness to the indeterminacy of perceptual habits—in entrenching a radically-reflexive praxis. I will ultimately argue that the indeterminacy of perceptual habits provides reason to be optimistic about the prospects for an ecophenomenological praxis under which one may genuinely begin to perceive the more-than-human world *better*.

4.1 Rethinking the Subject/Object Dualism

I’ve argued that we must disrupt our objectivistic conceptions of the more-than-human world if we’re to reconfigure human-world relationships outside the rubric of the latter’s domination. Plumwood holds that we must begin by addressing the exclusionary logic which legitimates hyperseparating ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ from the outset. A “non-reductive resolution”, she contends, “requires both that we reconceive ourselves as more animal and embodied, more ‘natural’, and that we reconceive nature as more mindlike than in the Cartesian conception” (1993, p.124). Nonetheless, I’ve suggested that any attempt to rethink ‘subject’ and ‘object’ terms with sufficient daring cannot begin from within a naturalistic remit without limiting nonhuman alterity via one’s imposition of the terms of a desituated ‘world-in-itself’. The task of uncovering subject-object continuities must, therefore, involve more than an uncritical appeal to the reality enframned by progressive natural scientists. Nevertheless, this admission needn’t make it impossible to address the more-than-human world on its own terms within an ecophenomenological remit. Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists outright deny the

subject/object bifurcation which might otherwise foreclose the possibility of access to it. In this section, then, I explore some possibilities for subject-object continuity which emerge by engaging with the meaningful terms under which the more-than-human world seemingly makes *itself* available for expression by the *radically-reflective* ecophenomenologist.

Continuities may be recognised in a ‘top-down’ way, where one addresses ‘subjective’ or mindlike properties in more-than-human ‘objects’. Under a ‘bottom-up’ strategy, conversely, one addresses the materiality of mind or subjectivity. Beginning with the former, Plumwood argues that important continuities may be unearthed by *taking care* to recognise the agency, teleology, and intentionality ordinarily denied to material entities. Intentionality and agency are especially difficult to identify under scientific naturalism, where non-agentic efficient causation is typically considered to be the only natural (rather than implausibly supernatural) power. However, we’ve seen that natural science’s underlying assumptions and apparatuses reflectively distort or unfairly exclude some of the meaningful phenomena available for expression. Identifying where mindlike traits might be plausibly attributed to nonhumans outside of these narrow confines will prove useful for our groundwork in two ways: firstly, by disrupting the bifurcation which licences a subject/object, or mind/nature *dualism*; secondly, by problematizing the totalizing assumption that the ‘natural’ world consists entirely of determinate ‘objects’, which may be epistemologically *possessed* and controlled in the requisite manner to licence their habitual instrumentalization.

4.1.1 More-than-Human Intentionality

Let’s begin with intentionality. Both Merleau-Ponty and Plumwood (1993, p.131) follow Franz Brentano in understanding intentionality to be irreducible to representational consciousness. Unlike Brentano, however, they do so partly to avoid unfairly precluding entities like ticks from the sphere of mindedness. For Plumwood (like Brentano), intentionality refers to myriad criteria like goal-directedness which cannot be accommodated into mechanistic stimulus-response models. We’ve also seen Merleau-Ponty exemplify dung beetle and feline intentionality in this manner. In these cases, Merleau-Ponty contends, “we no longer see where behaviour begins and mind ends” (*N*, p.178). Although Merleau-Ponty argues that more complex forms of intentionality aim less at goals and more towards the interpretation of symbols (as occurs between language users, for instance), this observation cannot support a differentiation in kind. “[T]here is not”, Merleau-Ponty argues, “a break between the planned animal, the animal that plans, and the animal without plan” (*N*, p.176). As we saw in chapter two, behaviours undertaken throughout the intentional continuum cannot be adequately explained by causal imposition of the way the world currently, ‘objectively’ *is*, even apparently at the cellular level.

Their trans-species attributions of intentionality shouldn't, however, be confused with the sort of romantic anthropomorphic projectionism which is entirely divorced from rigorous scientific study. As Louise Westling (2014, p.83) notes, Merleau-Ponty's account chimes with the work of influential contemporary microbiologists. 'Niche construction' theorists like Richard Lewontin (2000) and John Odling-Smee (2009), for instance, contend that even relatively simple organisms configure, select, and adapt salient features of the environment into which they ambiguously interlace and actively co-construct. Earthworms, for example, make soil more amenable to the water-intensive demands of their physiology by "tunnelling, exuding mucus, and eliminating calcite" (Odling-Smee, 2009, p.74). This process also provides structural and nutritional benefits for plant growth and, subsequently, the worms themselves.

Nonetheless, although they hold organism-environment dialectics to be mutually transformative, niche construction theorists remain largely beholden to the restrictive metaphysical assumptions of the naturalistic frameworks they employ. Odling-Smee, for instance, rightly criticises the "Newtonian residue" which requires standard evolutionary theory to understand organisms as "passive objects", causally determined by a determinate external environment (2009, p.77). Nevertheless, Odling-Smee still attributes any "non-random work" in earthworm niche-construction to the mechanical effects of "naturally selected information carried in their genes" and the determinate physico-chemical properties of 'objective' stimuli on the worm's chemoreceptors (2009, p.77). Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists, however, may more effectively address naturalism's 'Newtonian residue' by understanding the earthworm to intentionally engage with the phenomena "motivated" (rather than 'objectively' efficiently caused) by the meanings specific to the Gestalt it co-configures (*PP*, p.31; p.50). By eschewing naturalism's reductive presuppositions, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists may thereby afford earthworms the irreducible intentional teleology they appear to possess, without extending them an implausible reflective consciousness.

Although Merleau-Ponty focuses on animal intentionality, he's amenable to extending intentionality further (*SB*, p.123)⁴³. Likewise, Plumwood appeals to the intentionality

⁴³ In the *Nature* lectures, for instance, Merleau-Ponty began to speak of the world's *own* intentional 'logos' that he would later (mistakenly, in my view) characterize as the self-expression of 'the flesh'. Merleau-Ponty describes the "unfurling of the animal" involved in the development of axolotls, for instance, as being "like a pure wake that is related to no boat" (*N*, p.176). Passages like these lead Bannon (2014) to insist that the later Merleau-Ponty takes up a more-or-less Whiteheadian process metaphysics. I dispute Bannon's interpretation in chapter seven. Nevertheless, the link is useful, given Plumwood's (2002, pp.128-131) contention that process metaphysicians perpetuate anthropocentric hierarchism by conceiving stipulative humanoid properties (like atomic consciousness) to be universal norms to which nonhuman entities may be admitted by degree. Plumwood's general charge chimes with

exhibited by individual trees, which “appear as self-directing beings with an overall good or interest and a capacity for individual choice in response to their conditions of life”, or “[f]orest ecosystems [which] can be seen as wholes whose interrelationship of parts can only be understood in terms of stabilising and organising principles, which must again be understood teleologically” (1993, pp.135-6). Plumwood’s contentions are well-supported by recent plant science. Here, examples are more surprising, ranging from “kin recognition” behaviours between plants to “communication networks as extensive as whole forests in size”, through which information about predators is shared, and pre-emptive responses prepared (Trewavas and Baluška, 2011, p.1225).

The research cited above has, nonetheless, proven controversial amongst plant scientists. The plant physiologist Lincoln Taiz, for instance, accuses so-called ‘plant neurobiologists’ like František Baluška of “teleology, anthropomorphizing, [and] philosophizing” (Taiz, cited in Pollan, 2013). However, each of these ‘charges’ is revealing insofar as they speak to our concerns about the lack of critical self-reflexivity within naturalism. In the previous chapter, for instance, we problematized a natural science detached from all ‘philosophical’ commitments; not least when that science is couched in the sado-dispassionate and positivistic terms that Taiz thinks are uniquely suitable. Likewise, the charges of ‘teleology’ and ‘anthropomorphizing’ appear to assume the in-principle distinction between nonhuman ‘objects’ and humanoid ‘subjects’ that both Merleau-Ponty and Plumwood problematize. But Taiz’s problems run deeper than this. His main objection to Baluška’s attribution of plant intentionality revolves exclusively around apparently substantial differences between “electrical signalling” in plants and the “true neural mechanisms” of ‘higher’ animals (Taiz, cited in Pollan, 2013). Like many of his so-called ‘Alpi letter’ colleagues, Taiz simply doesn’t appear to be reflexive about the objectivistic (meta-)theoretical assumptions which underwrite his more fundamental commitment to mechanism. Hence, for reasons explored over the preceding chapters, his objections do little to undermine the plausibility of my present contentions.

In any case, whilst the attribution of nonhuman intentionality or mindedness remains controversial, it coheres with other murky or gradated boundaries between stipulative ‘natural kinds’ that many natural scientists already concede. These include the fuzzy living/non-living binary, which even Richard Dawkins acknowledges, and the animal/plant binary undermined by photosynthesising slugs (Morton, 2010, p.276; Angelin, 2015, p.346). These continuities might do important work in upsetting any charges of ‘anthropomorphism’ or ‘teleology’ which

my analysis of fleshy expression in chapter seven. Nonetheless, as we shall see, Plumwood courts a similar error through her panpsychism.

rely on hard-and-fast distinctions. However, resonances between the implausibility of a straightforward subject/object binary and scientists' wider taxonomic concessions seem to have been conveniently backgrounded for reasons we explored with Plumwood in the previous chapter.

Nonetheless, emphasizing nonhuman intentionality is important for two reasons. Most obviously, nonhuman intentionality problematizes the subject/object dualism which licences colonial relationships with the more-than-human world. Plumwood has argued, recall, that the dualistic restriction of mindedness or subjectivity pacifies nonhuman entities and, thus, erodes their capacity to resist *objectification* and commodification. Doing so, however, requires radically excluding a separable order of 'objects' which more-than-human intentionality problematizes. Simply put: even earthworms and forests don't obviously differ in kind from human 'subjects' in the definitive sense to licence their denigration, even under neo-Cartesian mechanisms like the Differential Imperative.

Perhaps more importantly, sensitivity to nonhuman intentionality may disrupt colonialism because acknowledging other intentional realities—ontologically real meanings irreducible to one's own—undercuts the very possibility of a totalizing onto-epistemological stance. Plumwood (2002, p.177) gives the example of a forest ecosystem whose irreducibly intentional goods are impossible with the economic or technoscientific schemas proffered by human parties. The latter not only construe the forest wholly in terms of their hegemonic interests (e.g. as a capital, fuel, or oxygen resource), their restrictive apparatuses also preclude things like *narrative goods* which, for entities like trees and earthworms, appear to be ontologically real, yet which reach into the future. Furthermore, since these narrative goods aren't obviously discernable as things-in-themselves, they expose the limitations of taking positivistic apparatuses, for instance, to exhaust reality and to therefore arbitrate *the* terms under which environmental 'issues' are understood. This is because the physiognomy of intentional objects available for expression ultimately depends on the situated, partial, and exclusionary terms of engagement under which they are taken up.

Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty has argued, heterogeneous intentional realities are truly different worlds, rather than divergent interpretations of the same determinate content. They cannot, therefore, be exhaustively enframed by even an ideal science without significant distortion. Uexküll's ticks and Merleau-Ponty's canines neatly demonstrate that the world's basic configuration is intimately related to the *embodied* grasp that one has on it. Given our limited and partial openings onto the world, some of the meanings available there may differ radically from our own and some, as our ticks and canines also illustrate, must simply be

beyond our ken. Nonhuman intentionality, in short, speaks *against* the project of anthropocentric mastery that is crystalized in the scientific naturalist's appeal to a purified realm of determinate things-in-themselves. The naturalist's objectivity of the God's Eye View can only really be sustained by violently subsuming reality under a particular kind of problematically anthropocentric—and, if Plumwood is right, *androcentric*—conceptual scheme.

4.1.2 Panpsychist Problems

There may, however, be a problem with the “weak panpsychism” Plumwood takes the widespread distribution of intentionality to imply (1993, p.133; 2002, p.54). To explain: one way to understand our overall objection to scientific naturalism lies in its failure to “balanc[e] the recognition of continuity with the recognition of difference” (Plumwood, 1993, p.125). Naturalism typically fails to do justice to important ontological continuities in carnal embeddedness or material relationality between the interrogative (human) ‘subjects’ and the material ‘objects’ it hyperseparates. Naturalism is also hostile to difference because it levels down the character of material ‘objects’ to that of a certain objectivistic purview (ordinarily, that of extensional realism), and reifies the terms of epistemic engagement specific to that purview as if trans-historical, and universal (albeit, perhaps, with the usual Kantian caveats). Our attention to nonhuman intentionality is, therefore, motivated largely by a renewed attempt to juggle these requirements sufficiently well to engage with more-than-human entities *in their alterity*.

However, by extending intentionality *universally*, we risk inappropriately overplaying continuity. Plumwood emphasizes that the panpsychist attribution of intentionality cannot be unproblematically equated with the universal extension of properties of human consciousness. This would constitute a sort of “strong panpsychism”, which assumes that “mind is either totally present in a human or humanoid form or totally absent”, and which Plumwood rightly rejects (1993, p.133; 2002, p.189). A related false dilemma appears to be behind Taiz's charges above. Nevertheless, as Merleau-Ponty's work helps to illustrate, we grasp *our* own intentionalities primarily as reflective consciousnesses operating within a certain kind of Gestalt structure. Ascriptions of nonhuman intentionality, therefore, at least risk being derivative and false extensions of humanoid consciousness, especially when, as in Plumwood's panpsychism, one's theoretical commitments *require* one to apply intentionality universally to divergent entities like neutrinos, marine ecosystems, or E.coli bacteria.

Given the likely implication of objectivistic sediment in the violence of our crisis situation, there may be good political reasons for *generally* beginning from an intentional stance, rather

than one organised to exclude nonhumans from the intentional sphere. However, we must also *take care* not to push this too far. Plumwood appears to do so when her commitment to panpsychism leads her to ascribe the same sort of teleology or narrative desire to whole mountains, stones, and glaciers that she does to snakes⁴⁴. Plumwood claims, for instance, that damming a glaciated valley is problematic because it prevents it from “telling its story” (1993, p.138). The attempt to engage with these entities on non-reductive terms is of great importance for environmental theory. Truly expressing the world is, after all, what radical reflection aims at. But by universally imposing atomic intentionality, one risks a theory-guiding, anthropomorphic projectivism that connotes a push towards the very onto-epistemological imperialism that Plumwood sought to mitigate *by* engaging with nonhuman mindedness. This is because, if nonhuman entities are ultimately recovered only on terms which largely *reflect* our own, then we’re likely to read our own meanings, intentions, and desires into them.

We previously saw glimpses of *something like* a tacit imperialism through Plumwood’s claims about cross-species translation, which resulted from her more fundamental commitment to naturalism. There, Plumwood’s interpretations of the snake’s dialogical interjections implied a problematic underlying anthropomorphism because Plumwood was insufficiently *attentive* to the heterogeneity of worlds in play. We can reasonably expect that where one ‘considers’ an absent intentionality then a more pronounced ventriloquism will be effected, especially given the extent to which dualistic logic presently infuses *our very worlds* as we glean them from the master perspective. None of this sits entirely easily with Plumwood’s claim that through weak panpsychism’s “intentional stance we open ourselves to possibilities and exchanges which are not just of our own devising” (1993, p.137).

Plumwood (2002, p.58) seems to be wrong, then, to imply that the anthropomorphic attribution of glacial intentionality, for instance, is at least not a dangerous error. The violent imposition of the intentional ‘goods’ of the glacier, marine ecosystem, snake, or rainforest—*as one understands them*—will at some point be weighed against others where there are multiple courses of action that cannot help but frustrate some of those under discussion. After all, Plumwood herself *defines* “ethics” as “the domain of response to the [more-than-human] other’s needs, ends, direction or meaning” (1993, p.138). If panpsychism is hostile to

⁴⁴ As Steven Shavero notes, positive arguments for panpsychism usually focus on demonstrating that consciousness couldn’t *emerge*. Panpsychists normally admit that “all facts are determined by facts about the smallest things” (Coleman, cited in Shavero, 2014, p.100). Thus, if the smallest things are non-sentient, then no sentience exists. However, I’ve already argued that ‘smallest’ ontological hierarchies are androcentric and phenomenologically suspect. Furthermore, Bennett will shortly give us good reason to think that sentience *could* emerge from non-sentient material, even from within a broadly naturalist purview. We will see Toadvine make a similar point from a phenomenological standpoint in chapter five. Since panpsychism doesn’t appear to be a prerequisite for the existence of consciousness, our remaining question is whether panpsychism is a palatable position. I argue not.

nonhuman alterity in the manner I've suggested, however, then what appears from within this purview to be a dialogical solution to an ethical quandary may mask a colonial monologue. This point speaks in favour of heightened focus on radical reflexivity rather than a blanket, albeit speculative, panpsychism.

But, as we saw in the previous chapter, this sort of problem isn't limited to panpsychism. It pervades the wider ecofeminist literature which responds to dualism by employing dialogical accounts of the human-nonhuman relationship which fail to sufficiently problematize the terms under which nonhuman interlocutors (or their alleged intentions) are understood. One example is Warren's (2000, p.102–3) account of climbing a rock in a manner which allegedly *exemplifies* the reciprocal care and respect characteristic of an anticolonial environmental ethic. However, Molly Jensen writes, Warren never "limit[s] or alter[s] her activity; she continues to climb. One could deduce from her account, that an ethic of friendship involves only a new sentiment toward non-human nature which may assuage human feelings of guilt but leave patterns of use and abuse undisturbed" (2002, p.42). Stacy Alaimo diagnoses a similar problem in Carolyn Merchant's account of *nonhuman* nature as a "free, autonomous actor" (1996, p.221); a characterization Merchant uses to prescribe a "partnership ethic" which relies on hyperbolized accounts of humanoid autonomy, and which "cannot [therefore] flourish within models of interdependency, ecological systems, or environmental health" (Alaimo, 2007, p.246). There is a particularly dangerous sort of error which may *discourage* genuinely radical reflection. Like Plumwood, Warren and Merchant seemingly try "to make the other's unfamiliarity familiar, and in doing so become blinded to the ways these perceptions conflict with the very misunderstandings about them that, ironically, one seeks to address by imaginatively representing them" (Johnson, 2008, p.175).

An alternative interpretation of Plumwood's panpsychism helps little on this score. Bannon holds that, for Plumwood, the intentionality in question is really *more-than*-human nature's (conceived holistically as an autonomous, teleological, centre of life) rather than belonging to the glacier as such (see Plumwood, 1993, p.137). However, Bannon argues, in that case, Plumwood still "personif[ies] nature as an agent with projects rather than confronting it in distinctively nonhuman terms" (2009, pp.48-9). By failing to problematize the hierarchical assumption that the 'non-mental' must be a privation, Plumwood threatens her own act of incorporation. Moreover, although the atomic concept of intentionality that Plumwood employs is necessary to attribute mindedness to nature-in-*itself*, the reflectively purified account of 'nature' (*qua* subject) thus retained takes more-or-less for granted modernism's anti-relational assumptions about identity, autonomy, and causality. Thus, not only does Plumwood risk reintroducing the basic terms of the subject/object dualism in the form of a

truncated (subject-subject) reversal, like Merchant, she also apparently wants to (somewhat inconsistently) use its terms to “isolate nature from its relations to humanity”, at least in an epistemic sense, “such that it can serve as a normative foundation for a variety of social projects” (Bannon, 2014, p.35).

A third interpretation, however, seems closer to the spirit, if not always the word, of Plumwood’s project. This interpretation takes Plumwood’s initial characterization of her panpsychism as paradigmatic: “the view that *mindlike* qualities are to be found in nature, that there is no basis for an absolute break or an unbridgeable gulf marking humans as mindhavers off from the rest of the universe” (1993, p.133). Although it operates under a misnomer, *this* weak panpsychism contends that the heterogeneity of mindlike qualities enjoyed by some nonhuman and human entities entails the impossibility of a sharp Brentanian distinction; it resists globally adjudicating which entities are minded (intentionally or otherwise)⁴⁵. Any such totalizing claims are rendered implausible once their heterogeneity is considered in any depth. Under this interpretation, then, Plumwood wouldn’t be pressed into a problematic anthropomorphism by the apparent requirement to universalize (humanoid) intentionality, nor need she necessarily purify nonhuman entities from their epistemic relations with humans. Plumwood’s account would also, therefore, be entirely consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s and, as we shall see, Jane Bennett’s.

4.1.3 Quasi-Agency

A suitably radical rethinking of the subject-object dualism cannot, however, rest with nonhuman intentionality, since further (more ambiguously) ‘mindlike’ qualities permeate the more-than-human world than either Plumwood or Merleau-Ponty acknowledge in any depth. In the present philosophical climate, the task of identifying them has fallen largely to ‘new materialists’ like Manuel DeLanda, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, who I will focus on here.

Bennett’s recent research is guided by the question: “How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?” (2010, p.viii). Her major work on the subject, *Vibrant Matter*, addresses “active powers issuing from nonsubjects” (2010, p.ix). By investigating the impersonal agency of entities like dead animals and processed foods that couldn’t be even ideally reified as ‘subjects’, Bennett aims to disrupt

⁴⁵ Extending our charitable reading, we might take Plumwood’s subject-subject dialogue to be the attempt to address the world on its own (sometimes non-intentional) terms. Like Merleau-Ponty, Bennett thinks that doing so requires one to engage in a *practical* dialectic, under which one is hyper-attentive to the surprising results of nonhuman agency, rather than absorbing it (2010, p.108). This requirement chimes with Plumwood’s promotion of ‘awe’ in the face of the world, yet needn’t universally require nonhuman parties to be ‘subjects’.

the objectivistic presupposition that politics is a solely human realm. There are, she thinks, important political agents at play in our daily experience which aren't 'persons' under anyone's estimation⁴⁶. Even 'nonsubjects' are, therefore, irreducible to objects, at least as 'objects' are ordinarily enframed.

Bennett's claim isn't that nonsubjects may configure their own inassimilable intentional meanings. Her political contentions are linked to the reasons she provides to think that scientific naturalism's residual subject/object binary is 'badly made': firstly, because agency isn't a straightforwardly 'subjective' or 'supernatural' property in the requisite sense for it to be satisfactorily purged from a purified 'objective' realm; secondly, because Bennett thinks that quasi-agency allows material entities to resist their objectification under any *totalizing* schema, given that "thing power" (2010, p.4) is neither mechanistic nor ideally-predictable in the requisite manner for it to be ontologically or epistemologically possessed.

Bennett argues, for instance, that paying attention to piles of rubbish in the street can disrupt our usual metaphysical hubris by making us recognise that these 'things' cannot be satisfactorily *reduced to* a determinate collection of physico-chemical properties or their utilitarian roles as intentional objects within human narratives. These things may call to us in their differential quasi-agentic capacities as *that* plastic bottle or rat corpse—"existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects"—which have the power, in conjunction with other "actants", to produce unpredictable effects (2010, p.4). The term 'actant' is Latour's. In Bennett's example above, it may refer to the mode of sunlight, or distribution of other bodies (e.g. bottle cap or glove) as well as the attention of the perceiving body-subject. The unpredictable effect Bennett herself experienced was the disruptive revelation of material quasi-agency, but similar actants may also call the perceiver to be struck by the callous wastefulness that such a collection betrays, and so on. Echoing Merleau-Ponty, Bennett argues that hers is clearly only one way that the things involved may normatively co-express *themselves*, should one slacken one's intentional threads sufficiently to notice. Nonetheless, we must emphasize that Bennett's specific example is important because it illustrates that nonsubjective quasi-agency may reveal itself *phenomenologically*.

But the extent of nonsubjective 'thing power' appears to extend well beyond the capacity to make us perceive the world differently. "[S]pontaneous structural generation" (DeLanda, 2000, p.16), for instance, occurs when chemical systems in far-from-equilibrium states 'opt', in a nonlinear manner, for one developmental path or another. This capacity for spontaneous

⁴⁶ Except for some panpsychists and object-oriented ontologists like Morton (2008, p.77), whose arguments I address in chapter five.

self-organization also plays out through cases of “nonlinear combinatorics” (2000, p.17), in which inorganic compounds acquire novel agentic powers which cannot be further dissected without misrepresentation. Manuel DeLanda’s (2004) paradigm example of the latter is how the dynamic behaviours of populations of imperfections in crystalline structures have the emergent ability to determine metallic brittleness. Since these micro-level behaviours are, strictly-speaking, unpredictable, contemporary swordsmiths focus not on how to control them, but on how to facilitate or restrict their movement, depending on the kinds of properties they seek. Likewise, Bennett herself documents “not-fully-predictable encounters between multiple kinds of actants” through manifold phenomena, including the nonlinear behaviour of biota like slime mould colonies and the more heterogenous collectives involved in the coalescence of mineral bodies in evolutionary processes, or the intra-agency of power grids (2010, pp.10-11; p.28; p.97; p.100).

It’s important to emphasize, however, that by appealing to the unpredictability of quasi-agency, unlike Merchant (2003), Bennett isn’t simply advocating a shift from mechanism to chaos or complexity theories. These sciences still aim at discovering “the law governing irregularities in nature, the hidden structures in apparently random systems, and underlying deterministic causes” (Cook, 2011, p.149). As Deborah Cook notes, given the ecofeminist imperative to resist hubristic attempts to dominate or objectify ‘nature’, Merchant’s enthusiasm about their ability to disrupt the androcentrism in our default metaphysics is misplaced. Bennett, however, is sensitive to the tendency towards mastery manifested through the totalizing stance that these sciences retain. This caution should be read into her appeals to DeLanda’s work in non-equilibrium thermodynamics, for example.

Instead, on Bennett’s account, “bodies enhance their power *in or as a heterogeneous assemblage*” (2010, p.23)⁴⁷. For Bennett, quasi-agentic power, which is augmented through its distribution across assemblages, is the source of *genuine* agentic novelty. An assemblage’s component bodies may contribute to its emergent powers to effect novel change but, taken discretely, they cannot *themselves* individually or collectively constitute its efficient cause. Bennett explains how a large-scale power blackout in the US, for example, can only be adequately explained through reference to the “distributive agency” (2010, p.31) of the whole assemblage. This assemblage includes coal, steel, neoliberal dogma, energy legislation, and electricity itself (which displays a more discrete quasi-agency insofar as electron movement isn’t itself linear or wholly predictable). The (quasi-)agentic capacities of each of these things

⁴⁷ The term ‘assemblage’ here refers to the claim that bodies aren’t stable or strictly atomic phenomena, but are composed of a multiplicity of fluid and impermanent actants (see Deleuze and Guattari, 2004).

problematizes their objectification because they too retain an *excess* that resists thematic coincidence with the terms under which a totalizing science might wish to subsume them. As Bennett puts it after approvingly citing Theodor Adorno's dictum that "'objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder'... life will always exceed our knowledge and control" (Adorno, 1973, p.5; Bennett, 2010, p.14)⁴⁸.

To explain further, it's crucial to emphasize that, for both DeLanda and Bennett, quasi-agency is distributive. Quasi-agency is something like a 'field' not straightforwardly *owned* by any actant. In Bennett's paradigm example of the rubbish, for example, her objectifying gaze was disrupted by a confederacy of entities. More pertinently, given my project in this thesis, Bennett also argues that, within the hyper-consumeristic paradigm of "American materialism", we're so surrounded by 'disposable' (and disposed) bodies that the ordinary effect of *these* assemblages is "*antimaterial*"; they conceal "the vitality of matter" in a manner that serves to licence our uncritical objectification of it (2010, p.5). But even these assemblages must be understood as mosaics of ontologically heterogeneous bodies, across which (quasi-)agency is distributed. Thus, for Bennett, the important dynamics of thing power are essentially *relational*.

This is important. By drawing our *attention* towards the relationality of (quasi-)agency rather than maintaining an exclusive focus on intentional individuals, Bennett may address some of the residual atomism which punctuates Plumwood's account⁴⁹. This shift of focus also facilitates important gains in recognising continuities *and* differences between more-than-human entities. It may do so by acknowledging that even nonsubjects like gloves and concrete may escape our thematising grasp, without requiring that their resistance be limited to the attribution of a narrow intentional stance. Bennett's investigation of 'mindlike' qualities isn't, therefore, obviously vulnerable to the charge of neo-Cartesianism that uncharitable readers might be tempted to level at Plumwood.

Bennett also offers a useful corrective to worrying tendencies in both Plumwood and Merleau-Ponty to treat inorganic entities as if they sit on the world (apparently unproblematically) *as* use-objects. One of Plumwood's telling examples is of a Coke bottle which, insofar as it has no intentional context *itself*, allegedly "has no direction of travel, and

⁴⁸ Adorno also thinks that the 'identity thinking' involved in naturalism (i.e. where one aims for conceptual adequation with the essence of the 'thing-in-itself') is related to the subjugation of 'nature', both 'external' and 'internal' to oneself. Like Merleau-Ponty, Adorno thinks identity thinking is "compulsive" and prescribes hyper-dialectical means to disrupt this compulsion (see Cook, 2011, p.67).

⁴⁹ This might be unfair to Plumwood. She acknowledges relationality via her account of the intersubjective institution of dualism and how our material relationality requires us to widen the scope of prudential concern, for instance. Nevertheless, Bennett provides important further details and a welcome shift in focus.

all outcomes with respect to it are indifferent” (1993, p.138) until it features within another intentional narrative. For Bennett, however, plastic bottles retain *their own* quasi-agency in manifold ways even when discarded. We saw one of these via the bottle’s role in Bennett’s revelation about the rubbish. More politically salient manifestations of the bottle’s thing power might include its capacity to leach poisons into groundwater supplies, or its capacity, when combined with other actants and burnt as waste, to become part of another assemblage; one which, through its carcinogenic quasi-agency, may literally become part of one’s flesh, or pass (with disastrous consequences) from one body to another through breastfeeding (see Tuana, 2007).

To limit the bottle’s political importance *to* its contingent situation within an intentional horizon carries a faint whiff of residual dualism, not least since the sorts of issues outlined above are ultimately most likely to befoul those who constitute dualism’s underside. Poorer people are, after all, disproportionately likely to work in plastic factories, or live in areas directly affected by mass waste management strategies (Tuana, 2007, p.203). The larger-scale effects of these mechanised industries—anthropogenic desertification, flooding, and so on—are also suffered particularly keenly by those in ‘non-Western’ nations, not to mention the gazelle or addax which face extinction. If, as seems plausible, even nonsubjects cannot be satisfactorily *reduced to* their ‘determinate’ physico-chemical properties, their utilitarian roles in the intentional narratives of others, or to social constructions with no *novel* causal powers of their own, then recognition of their quasi-agency appears to have an important role to play in any suitably radical reconfiguration of our naturalistic purview.

Nonetheless, we should resist abandoning our previous insights and taking up Bennett’s brand of actor-network theory wholesale. I explore some concerns about Bennett’s residual naturalism in section 4.1.9, but here is another: whilst Bennett is surely correct that nonsubjects might, in principle, have goods that should show up under any ethically and politically sophisticated praxis, it doesn’t seem that Bennett could permit them *narrative* goods like those required to explain the teleological orientation of (quasi-)subjects like earthworms and forests. To account for these behaviours, it seems that we require recourse to the sort of nonhuman intentionality which Bennett distances herself from. Although, like DeLanda (2000, p.17), Bennett understands actor-network theory to be compatible with intentionality, the only references to intentionality in *Vibrant Matter* concern its cautious attribution (in a *significantly* reduced form) to humans (2010, p.32). However, as I argued above, by eschewing or dramatically limiting nonhuman intentionality, we sacrifice something important from our radically-reflective account of the more-than-human world. This is why we need to heed intentionality *and* other ‘mindlike’ qualities if we’re to take better stock of it.

4.1.4 An Aside: The Anthropocene

Whilst it isn't our main focus here, I'd like to pause momentarily to consider how the preceding analyses might expose something troubling about contemporary Anthropocene rhetoric. Of course, the Anthropocene literature is vast and arises from a range of different fields and concerns, but I want to focus on one specifically philosophical concern: namely, that by affirming the 'epochal' shift crystallized by the Anthropocene moniker, one is allegedly afforded better means of acknowledging, and more positively responding to, the profound effects that human beings have on the more-than-human world.

I suggested in my introductory chapter that the evidence typically cited by Anthropocene proponents (ecosystem collapse, mass species extinction, and so on) suggests that our relationships with the rest of the world are deeply problematic. However, insofar as it wishes to make claims about 'epochal' significance, pro-Anthropocene rhetoric often goes beyond acknowledging the massive extent of human influence and draws more sweeping (and problematic) *metaphysical* conclusions instead. Following Bill McKibben's (1989) famous contention that anthropogenic changes to the Earth's chemistry have spelled 'the end of nature', the ecologist Erle Ellis, for instance, claims that "[f]rom a philosophical point of view, nature is now human nature; there is no more wild nature to be found, just ecosystems in different states of human interaction" (2011, p.1027). Likewise, we've seen Paul Crutzen focus on how we should behave towards the '*formerly* natural world'. At least when taken beyond its original geological context, many such Anthropocene proponents seem to think that the definitive reason to adopt the 'Anthropocene' term lies in its acknowledgement of an epoch characterized by the anthropogenic *termination* of nonhuman nature.

To understand what exactly is problematic about this claim, it's necessary to first ward off a straw man. My point isn't so crude as to highlight the massive anthropocentric hubris involved in claiming that nonhuman nature has been definitively 'ended' in the sense of being ontologically exterminated or left causally inert. As Hailwood (2016) clarifies, nobody involved in the Anthropocene debate thinks that human contributions *alone* increase greenhouse gas emissions, for instance. Cattle contribute to this problem, as do rice plants, and microorganisms that don't significantly populate human bodies. The Anthropocene proponents I have in mind focus on the claim that human behaviour has—via intensive agriculture, urbanization, and so on—shaped these contributions in a sufficiently widespread manner to cease speaking about nature in a 'nonhuman' sense.

Nevertheless, we should have serious reservations about *this* sort of claim, which I will demonstrate by focusing on one recent (and superficially plausible) version of it. The political

theorist Manuel Arias-Maldonado holds that the “socionatural hybridization” allegedly characteristic of the Anthropocene epoch is compatible with the ‘end of nature’ hypothesis, because “[n]ature is not autonomous from [human] society anymore” (2016, pp.68-9). Like Vogel (2002, p.33), Arias-Maldonado thinks that the impact of anthropogenic processes from the domestication of wolves to the rise in sea levels shows that we have used human agency to, literally, construct ‘nature’ wholesale, albeit in ways we didn’t necessarily foresee. For Arias-Maldonado, it is appropriate to speak of nature’s ‘construction’ because, whilst the Anthropocene’s emblematic conditions don’t herald the end of nonhuman causal powers, within the remaining human-nature assemblage, “human agency remains the main driver for the transformation of nature” (2016, p.68). Thus, Arias-Maldonado thinks, it is appropriate, liberating, and politically useful to adopt the Anthropocene term to denote a *postnatural* epoch.

In making these claims, however, Arias-Maldonado explicitly invokes a troubling distinction in kind between human *agents* and nonhuman *actants*, largely because the former possesses the apparently requisite intentional “self-awareness” to facilitate their exceptional “transformative powers” (2016, p.60; p.68). Whilst Arias-Maldonado agrees with Bennett that hard-and-fast subject/object distinctions are problematized by “an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity”, he nevertheless argues that the aforementioned anthropogenic processes testify to the “primacy of human agency” within the current human-nature assemblage (Bennett, 2010, p.31; Arias-Maldonado, 2016, p.57; p.68). Conversely, within that assemblage, Arias-Maldonado understands nonhuman nature to be agentic insofar as it provides the allegedly *stable* material and structural conditions within which transformational human actions take place, and which make those actions possible (2016, p.60). Although he ostensibly situates his metaphysics within a more relational remit than his Cartesian forebears, Arias-Maldonado thereby reinstates the same problematic dualism which understands human culture alone to be transformative, and nonhuman nature to be more-or-less inert or plastic.

He may do so, however, only by failing to take Merleau-Ponty, Bennett, and Plumwood’s insights sufficiently seriously. Arias-Maldonado understands intentionality in a problematically humanoid manner (i.e. as atomic, self-reflective consciousness) that licences his human exceptionalism. Furthermore, whilst Arias-Maldonado formally eschews Cartesian mechanism, he retains at least a problematic ‘Newtonian residue’ in his account of nonhuman agency. Like Odling-Smee, Arias-Maldonado is willing to permit nonhuman nature quasi-agency more-or-less only to the extent that it minimally conditions (human) evolution in a nonlinear, but still entirely *deterministic* (and therefore ideally-predictable), manner (2016, p.59). More worryingly, it is by crystalizing the terms of this mind/nature dualism in its most

extreme manifestation that Arias-Maldonado thinks that the Anthropocene provides a better normative lens in which to frame human-nature relationships going forward.

But the problem here isn't only that Arias-Maldonado *underestimates* the intentional or quasi-agentic capacities of nonhuman entities. More fundamentally, he also appears to misunderstand how actor-network theory must unpack self-aware or intentional human action in his appropriation of it. For Bennett, as we shall see in the next section, intentional actions aren't merely sustained, subtended, or minimally-influenced by their material conditions in the manner Arias-Maldonado suggests (via the slow evolution of microbes which populate human bodies and such). For Bennett, intentional actions are, demonstrably, more directly delineated by the quasi-agentic contributions of more-than-human actants (including omega fats and earthworms) in the overall agentic assemblage. Thus, speaking about 'human' actions in the radically exclusionary manner Arias-Maldonado must relies, for Bennett, on a kind of neo-Cartesian category mistake. It misunderstands the 'human' to occupy an inappropriately purified or privileged ontological sphere. By setting his stall out in this manner, Arias-Maldonado is set dangerously in favour of "reduc[ing] *political* agency to human agency" (Bennett, 2010, p.xv) because he takes actions to be definitively human—where humans are discernible as exceptional 'drivers' of change—in virtue of their being performed by a human actor. Thus, by adopting the Anthropocene term on the grounds Arias-Maldonado suggests, we risk obscuring nonhuman (quasi-)agency and further risk colluding with dualistic logic, particularly in Plumwood's 'backgrounding' sense. We also thereby risk something diametrically *opposed* to Bennett's explicit project: a context in which we actively diminish attentiveness to the political agency of *more-than*-human bodies by using our reflective, linguistic, and conceptual abilities to shift focus *away* from it.

Arias-Maldonado's errors, however, aren't simple oversights. They appear to be intimately linked to a wider framework of (meta-)theoretical commitments of the ilk that Plumwood problematizes. In the final analysis, like Crutzen, Ellis, and numerous other Anthropocene boosters, Arias-Maldonado uses the above misconstruals to ascribe a familiar "transhistorical necessity" to "mastering the natural environment in order to survive and thrive as a species" (2016, p.61). The problem with this recommendation should be clear. It sees more sophisticated forms of anthropogenic mastery as *the* 'solution' to the 'issues' which constitute the environmental crisis. Not only are some of the objectivistic metaphysical assumptions essential to legitimate this project of mastery misled, as itself an integral force in establishing crises, the dualistic drive to mastery cannot afford adequate reflection on, nor substantially underpin, politico-ethical environmental theory going forward. That is, at least if we're to attend to our submerged mass.

At the risk of labouring an important point, it is, as Jason Moore argues, tacit adherence to exactly this sort of dualistic purview that allows Crutzen and his many successors to uncritically trace the social roots of the Anthropocene back to a species of practical behaviours—the burning of fossil fuels—rather than the objectivistic and dualistic assumptions which continue to licence those behaviours at unsustainable levels. Their “standard narrative” contends that the Anthropocene began when “massive energy subsid[ies]” ‘locked’ in ‘natural resources’ like coal were appropriated by a homogenised, and trans-societal *Anthropos* (Steffen *et al*, 2007, p.616; Moore, 2016, p.81). As a historical account, Crutzen’s thereby normalizes the imperialistic or instrumentalist viewpoint which culminates in the problematically *antimaterial* purview of Bennett’s ‘American materialism’. Moreover, by framing the debate as a matter of how humans have, and might in future better *exploit natural resources*, the standard narrative doesn’t “challenge the naturalised inequalities, alienation and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production... [I]t removes inequality, commodification, imperialism, patriarchy and much more from the problem of humanity-in-nature” (Moore, 2016, pp.81-2). In short, by petrifying a lack of critical self-reflexivity to these concerns under the ‘Anthropocene’ banner, its proponents risk legitimating the problematic attitudes and behaviours responsible for our environmental crisis—and, indeed, the conditions apparently emblematic of the Anthropocene—in the first place. The ecofeminist Chris Cuomo perhaps puts it best when she says: “There is a unique hubris in characterizing your own culture’s destructive patterns, which have been used against other cultures, as definitively human, and then defining those destructive patterns as the harbinger of an already established new-age destined to define the future” (2017, p.7).

4.1.5 Back to It

So, where are we? We should be reminded that our major task in the present chapter is to address how a radically-reflective ecophenomenological praxis might help to disrupt the objectivistic commitments which precipitate the violence of our environmental crisis. Plumwood and Bennett each offer important correctives to our objectifying tendencies by highlighting important subject-object continuities regarding the mindlike qualities nonhuman entities plausibly possess. Not only do their respective identifications of nonhuman intentionality and quasi-agency problematize the reductive terms of scientific naturalism’s residual subject/object dualism, they also help to expose the implausibility of naturalism’s totalizing God’s Eye account of ontological reality. Plumwood and Bennett thus help to show that natural science’s exclusionary assumptions and apparatuses are problematic insofar as they “close off the dialectic” in an asymmetric and objectivistic manner that ensures that one

“does not encounter the object as such, in its own fullness” (Haraway, 1991, p.198; Fox Keller, cited in Plumwood, 1993, p.124). If, as Plumwood argues, this superficiality is tied, on a logical level, to our denigration of the more-than-human world, then these revelations are valuable to a radically-reflective rethinking of our ‘submerged mass’. Nonetheless, I also hope to have shown that, by eschewing naturalism’s basic metaphysical stipulations and taking up a mode of intentional engagement that is more sensitive to plausible subject-object overlaps or isomorphisms instead, an ecophenomenological praxis informed by these insights may entertain a richer and less exclusionary account of the more-than-human world.

4.1.6 Material Mentality

Where Plumwood and other ecofeminists are often much vaguer, however, is on how subject-object continuities might emerge by exploring the materiality of subjectivity. This oversight is particularly problematic, given that bottom-up strategies have the potential to directly disrupt the hyperbolically autonomous master-as-subject perspective, rather than shifting taxonomic boundaries to incorporate new incumbents. We’ve seen how a related failure to sufficiently problematize humanoid characterizations of nonhuman mindedness has limited ecofeminist attempts to rethink the subject/object dualism with sufficient daring. Plumwood’s failure to accommodate the radical heterogeneity of nonhuman intentionality, for instance, was pivotal in my recommendation to resituate her insights ecophenomenologically.

But the problem isn’t only that ecofeminists have little to say about the salience of nonhuman bodies on the worlds they differentially grasp. In the context of our ecophenomenological groundwork, investigating the materiality of *human* mentality—particularly intentionality—is essential to unseat naturalism’s residual Baconian subject. I argued in chapter two, recall, that problematically objectivistic ways of revealing the more-than-human world may be traced back, in significant part, to the attempt to transcend or naturalize one’s embodied grasp of the world; to mistake the determinate intentional objects perception ends in for reality’s basic ontological constituents. If the behavioural violence of our crisis situation is as intimately connected to our imposition of conceptual violence as I suspect, then any attempt to reconfigure subject and object (complete with their naturalized inequalities) must interrogate bottom-up continuities more thoroughly.

That is not to say that ecofeminists give us *no* ammunition for our cause. Warren, for example, is typical amongst ecofeminists in suggesting that:

Relationships are not something extrinsic to who we are, not an “add on” feature of human nature; they play an essential role in what it is to be human. Relationships of humans to the nonhuman environment are, in part, constitutive of what it is to be a human.

(1990, p.143)

However, as Kelly Burns (2008, p.102) observes, despite Warren’s resistance to mind/nature and subject/object dualisms, she never discusses the salience of one’s embodiment or material relationality in any detail. Likewise, Plumwood repeatedly disavows the Cartesian paradigm which sado-dispassionately cleaves mind from body. However, beyond these general commitments, ecofeminists consistently offer little more. Exactly *how* one’s materiality saturates one’s mentality is consistently left unarticulated.

More troublingly, on the few occasions where Plumwood ventures further details, she is concerned with foregrounding the material dependencies that provide human subjectivity’s “enabling condition” (2002, p.17). Plumwood thus courts a similarly problematic metaphysical division of labour to Arias-Maldonado’s, which is particularly odd since she intends her progressive naturalism to *show* how “[n]ature as biospheric other is not a background part of our field of action or subjectivity, not a mere precondition for human action, nor a refractory foil to self” (2001, p.16). Now, Plumwood *has* given convincing reason not to consider nonhuman entities as mere background instruments in terms of their politico-ethical status (e.g. by subsuming marine ecosystems under instrumentalist terms). This leaves aside, however, how ‘nature’ infuses, dictates, or delineates (human) mindedness to the extent she herself, rightly, thinks necessary to dismantle the dualistic hierarchism which underwrites scientific naturalism.

So, why the silence? Jensen argues that these remarkably common ecofeminist oversights are non-accidentally related to their political activism. She contends that “[e]cological feminist aversion toward gender essentialism and biological reductionism seems to have resulted in an aversion to the body itself and has hampered their ability to express an alternative ethic of bodily embeddedness and relation” (2002, p.38)⁵⁰. Jensen focuses on the salience of embodiment for an environmental *ethic*, however the same concerns about dualistic

⁵⁰ Alaimo (2007, p.237) diagnoses a related aversion to ‘nature’—perceived to be an “accessory to essentialism”—common to environmental feminisms more broadly. Whilst the materiality of the body is recognised, she contends, it is usually conceived to be passive or plastic and, thus, amenable to construction, which, in post-Butlerian discourse, is broadly considered to be the ‘true’ determinant of identity. As Alaimo also argues, however, dualistically cleaving (nonhuman) nature from (human) culture isn’t desirable either. We might even say, with Richard Twine, that, given its inattention to the body’s resistance, alterity, and agency, “social constructionism can itself be thought of as a form of (discursive) essentialism” (2001, p.37). I elaborate on this issue in chapter six.

essentialism seem to be manifested in the absence of a substantive ecofeminist account of how one's material embodiment impacts upon perception, cognition, and praxis. Nonetheless, whilst we may be sympathetic to these ecofeminists' concerns, their related failure to engage with the *epistemic* salience of embodiment is, in the final analysis, deeply problematic. I argued in the previous chapter that, in Plumwood's work at least, this failure ultimately allows problematically objectivistic *ontological* assumptions to creep back in in the form of a Kuhnian naturalism.

4.1.7 Operative/Act Intentional Intertwinings

Merleau-Ponty, however, fares better in this regard. If what I've argued thus far holds, not only are beetles, trees, and even piles of rubbish more 'mindlike' than we're tempted to recognise, one's reflective consciousness is itself intertwined with a pre-reflective intentional bond not entirely unlike the one that a tree or tick may differentially secure with the world⁵¹. As Merleau-Ponty argues, it is primarily through operative intentionality that the world's meanings are *actively* accessed. To reiterate: this is because one's motor intentionality underwrites the basic grasp of the world on which any epistemological or ontological contentions rely. If the project of recovering non-reductive continuity is essential to instigate better relationships with the more-than-human world, then Plumwood again finds a key ally in Merleau-Ponty. He shows that one's body doesn't just provide the foundation for subjectivity, but rather that one's body *is* one's mentality, in a crucial sense.

However, these contributions may only prove beneficial if Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology can allay the concerns ecofeminists retain about the risk of gendered essentialism being smuggled into any normative account of embodiment. These are important concerns, but since addressing them is the main task of chapter six, I will defer detailed treatment of them until then. For now, however, it will suffice to say that there is no obvious in-principle incompatibility between advancing a normative account of one's embodied grasp and maintaining critical self-reflexivity to the sediment which might infuse it in surreptitious ways. Merleau-Ponty employs an account of the intentional arc which is intended to do justice to this very concern. Moreover, it is attention to this sediment that motivates a radically-reflective *praxis* over the prescription of a fixed, trans-historical metaphysics. Even in cashing out some of the epistemological and ontological significance of one's perceptual embodiment,

⁵¹ One would probably be anthropomorphizing were one to contend that a tree's intentionality, for instance, includes *reflective* sediment like that of one's economic history. Nonetheless, it would be too quick to deny the impact of sedimentation entirely, given the apparent import of kin recognition and intra-forest communication to subsequent tree behaviours.

then, Merleau-Pontians needn't sacrifice a heightened and habitual focus on the sort critical self-reflexivity rightly encouraged by ecofeminists.

4.1.8 Nonsubjective Subjectivity

Nonetheless, our ecophenomenological investigation may further benefit from insights yielded by new materialists since, they argue, one *is* one's body, *but so are others*. One may affirm (as I have) Merleau-Ponty's claim that one's embodied grasp is decisive in revealing the world's meaningful physiognomy, however, where we are attuned to our material relationality, it is "not enough to say we are 'embodied'. We are rather, *an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes" (Bennett, 2010, p.113). For Bennett, the material contributions to one's grasp of the world must extend beyond one's functional or physiological orientation. Even the food (or PVC) one has consumed (and which is now ambiguously part of oneself) may maintain the requisite quasi-agency to shape some of the world's normative meanings and the ways that we subsequently relate to it. To illustrate, Bennett cites empirical research on the relationships between fats and "cognitive dispositions" (2010, pp.40-1), including proclivity to violence and depression. We saw in chapter two that depression may affect one's phenomenological grasp in surprisingly straightforward (e.g. olfactory) ways. Moreover, depression often colours the world's meaningful physiognomy more significantly in terms of the axiological value things present, or affective meanings made available. Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu (2012) concur with Bennett's general point. They highlight research which suggests that elevation of oxytocin levels (a neurotransmitter whose secretion is increased by taking some kinds of contraceptive pill or asthma medication) increases tendencies to perceive other members of a given group as trustworthy. Interestingly, given our exploration of dualism, under increased exposure to oxytocin, subjects' willingness to *sacrifice* individuals of other races (and others perceived to be outside their group) also increases.

The quasi-agency Bennett makes explicit here also derives from more banal origins. Earthworms, for example, are important actants in that, by making soil hospitable for agriculture, they co-produce the material conditions for the possibility of human agency, and certain foods (such as those mentioned above) that may contribute to our grasp in more immediate ways (Bennett, 2010, p.98). Moreover, earthworms (and, as Ladelle McWhorter (1999) would have it, more diffuse entities like mineral deposits or aggregations of dirt) may delineate how we grasp and relate to the rest of the world in more pronounced ways by shaping circumstances whereby agricultural resources (or the lack thereof) provide motives for action, economic decision making, and prevalent attitudes (e.g. hostilities) towards Others.

But their remarkable (quasi-)agency is perhaps most apparent when it is *disrupted*. Samuel Awuah-Nyameky (2014, pp.48-9), for instance, observes that anthropogenic climate change has impacted profoundly on the frequency and intensity of bushfires in Ghana's Berekum region. These bushfires have left the residual material conditions largely inhospitable to entities like earthworms which would otherwise facilitate the bush's recovery by improving local soil fertility. Subsequent shifts in the area's dominant flora have led many of Berekum's inhabitants to abandon agricultural vocations and take up game hunting instead. More significantly (at least from an ecological perspective), forest reserves in the area have subsequently rapidly diminished because newly established hunters are actively *setting* further bushfires to force the animals on which they now rely out of the bush to be shot. Given that the disruption of nonhuman bodies appears to have radically influenced how Berekum's residents relate to their immediate environments, it is surely misleading to argue that even human bodies (narrowly conceived) are *the* source of our grasp on the world and provide our basic means of relating or behaving towards it.

4.1.9 Problems with Bennett's Naturalism

These important contributions notwithstanding, we should have some concerns about the ontological flattening Bennett employs. One issue emerges when Bennett says that "human actants... turn out to *be* confederations of tools, microbes, minerals, sounds and other 'foreign' materialities. Human intentionality can emerge as agentic only by way of such a distribution" (2010, p.36, emphasis mine). Taken solely as an attempt to acknowledge our diffuse materiality and the many contributors to our behaviours or praxis, Bennett's claim has evident merit. She does, after all, thereby further sharpen radical reflection's critical focus by highlighting some of the more troubling reasons why perception might sometimes have the 'anonymous' character Merleau-Ponty claims. But Bennett takes her ontological contentions to have more profound ramifications. Worryingly, she is led to assert that "[a]utonomy and strong responsibility seem to me to be empirically false" (2010, p.37). Even setting aside my specific agenda for the moment, it's hard to see how such a limited conception of autonomy could satisfy even *Vibrant Matter's* own explicit "ethical task... to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it", given that we "*are* vital materiality and that we are surrounded by it, even though we do not always see it that way" (2010, p.14).

It's tempting to think that I am (and, perhaps, even Bennett is) clutching at straws by seeking to retain the requisite degree of deliberative or intentional autonomy to licence the possibility that one might learn to better perceive and relate to the more-than-human world in any profound or important sense. But I don't think so, for reasons that become clear if we

further inspect Bennett's reasoning. Bennett charges her 'vital materialism' with acknowledging the material relationality of ontology in general, and agency in particular. In doing so, she takes up Latour's imperative to disrupt the modernist project of 'purification' because that project is unduly hostile to relationality from the outset. Whilst her commitment to this task is laudable, however, like Latour, Bennett ultimately fails to satisfy its demands because she retains a certain modernistic purification of the *epistemic* relations between situated, embodied beings and the worlds they theorize. There does, after all, appear to be a problematic disconnect between her attempts to problematize the hyperbolic autonomy or impartiality of subjectivity (by appealing to the surreptitious contributions of omega fats or vitamin levels), whilst simultaneously proposing a transcendent or transcendental description of ontological reality-in-itself (as definitively described by a curiously desituated actor-network theory). In the final analysis, this disconnect proves problematic because only by flattening ontology according to the residual assumptions and prejudices licenced by objective thought can Bennett's austere conception of autonomy be ultimately legitimated.

It's telling, for instance, that Bennett's radical limitation of autonomy and responsibility derives from their *empirical* falsehood. We've explored empiricism's problems at length. As a manifestation of objective thought, empiricism is incompatible with serious attention to the situated and embodied perceptual fields within which its insights are gleaned, *and* it is problematically limited in terms of the phenomena it may find in the world. Of course, Bennett is no straightforward empirical realist in either the Baconian or Kantian mould. Nonetheless—as is demonstrated in her repeated attempts to describe *the* fundamental contours of mind-independent reality-in-itself—she seems to share a related commitment to metaphysical naturalism which is, at base, similarly constrained by objective thought's stipulations and predilections. If Bennett retains the naturalistic hierarchy of explanation under which empirical descriptions of 'objective' reality retain deliberative priority over more straightforwardly perceiver-dependent phenomena (such as greater deliberative or intentional autonomy) revealed phenomenologically, then this may help us to understand why Bennett permits only the limited (and homogenised) account of autonomy she does. However, Bennett's commitment to naturalism's hierarchical assumptions is especially problematic if, as Merleau-Ponty argues, experience is the *only* 'ultimate court of appeal in our knowledge of things'. Given Bennett's opposition to the modernist project of purification, this is an insight to which she should be amenable.

Independent of the push towards naturalistic realism (which perhaps imbues Bennett's *materialism*), and heeding Plumwood's decree to acknowledge continuity *and* difference, it seems to me that one must admit the overall inescapability of relational selfhood which

Bennett uncovers. However, one needn't *reduce* selfhood—and crucially one's agency or autonomy—to those relations in the manner Bennett implies. Bennett rightly encourages attentiveness to the epistemic, affective, and behavioural entanglements which are often coloured by bodies or relationships beyond one's epidermis. She further encourages us to keep open the dialectic of human-world engagement since, as agentic, the more-than-human world is too unpredictable to be satisfactorily subsumed under any totalizing schema. Yet, given our renewed attention to alterity and heterogeneity, Bennett's cannot be considered an exhaustive account of ontological reality entirely independent of the horizons and apparatuses under which it is uncovered. By resituating Bennett's insights ecophenomenologically, however, we're given reason for cautious optimism about a more positive human-world *praxis* than Bennett herself consistently maintains⁵².

Nonetheless, we should emphasize that recognising the somewhat ambiguous diffusion of our mentality is important. Not only would a greater *attentiveness* “to the indispensable foreignness that we are” help to disrupt the dualistic hierarchism and objectivistic metaphysics which are such dangerously compatible bedfellows, perhaps more importantly, it may also serve to disrupt the entrenched tendency “to produce and consume in the same violently reckless ways” (Bennett, 2010, p.113). Why? Because the pervasive fantasies of human mastery diagnosed by ecofeminists are shown more clearly to be unachievable, dangerous fantasies:

In the most obvious sense, if one cannot presume to master one's own body, which has “its” own forces, many of which can never be comprehended, even with the help of medical knowledge and technologies, one cannot presume to master the rest of the world, which is forever intra-acting in inconceivably complex ways.

(Alaimo, 2007, p.250)

One thing that Alaimo means to suggest here is that critical self-reflexivity about one's material embodiment may draw one away from a project of colonial possession (in both conceptual and behavioural senses) and towards a stance of *humility*. Given that he understands humility to be exemplified by commitment to the sort of onto-epistemological

⁵² The worry here might be that, by distancing them from a naturalist purview, the ontological seriousness of Bennett's contentions is sacrificed. In the present ecophenomenological context, however, this worry would be misplaced, since the quasi-agency of earthworms, plastic, and omega fats may be as ontologically ‘real’ as the physicist's quarks or the biologist's atoms. I address the question of ‘realism’ in phenomenology in chapter five.

openness facilitated by a praxis of radical reflection, Alaimo's is a sentiment that could've come straight from the pages of Merleau-Ponty.

4.2 Seeing Better

Let's recap. I've argued that insights gleaned from ecophenomenologists, ecofeminists, and new materialists serve to problematize the dominant subject/object terms, and related metatheoretical assumptions about 'possessing' the latter, which contribute to the 'submerged mass' of our environmental crisis. Where one is prepared to suspend fundamental commitment to the objectivistic metaphysical stipulations of our default naturalism, I've suggested, one may be open to a richer range of ontologically real phenomena (e.g. nonhuman intentionality, inorganic quasi-agency, or axiological meanings) than can be consistently sustained within the ordinary remit of natural science. This is important if, as I've also argued, naturalism's objectivistic assumptions and apparatuses precipitate our crisis situation by legitimating the violent attitudes and behaviours responsible for the 'environmental issues' which constitute it. By engaging with the more-than-human world beyond the confines of scientific naturalism, however, the subject-object continuities identified above problematize an exhaustive project of ontological or epistemological objectification and the dualistic metatheoretical assumptions which may underpin such projects. Simply put: (nonhuman) intentionality and (quasi-)agency prevent the more-than-human world from being reduced to a determinate or determinable collection of *objects*, properties, or relations-in-themselves as naturalism ordinarily demands.

I've also argued that the aforementioned insights should be reconfigured within an ecophenomenological remit. This is because ecophenomenology is uniquely well-situated to evade the residual 'objective thought' which pervades even the 'suitably adjusted' naturalisms pursued by Plumwood and Bennett. Contrary to appearances, these naturalisms retain traces of the subject/object dualism through their failure to address the radical contribution of (other) bodies (otherwise significantly confined to the realm of 'object') to one's underpinning epistemic grasp of the world (implicitly: the privileged realm of the transcendent or transcendental 'subject'). I've argued that critical self-reflexivity about these sorts of concerns is essential if we're to maintain openness to heterogenous more-than-human entities and the radically differential worlds they may inhabit.

The above arguments effectively amount to the requirement to deny natural science a monopoly on ontological and epistemological matters where the more-than-human world—and, particularly, the environmental crisis—is concerned. To reiterate: this is because natural science's totalizing project requires a substantial ontological purification of the 'objects' of its concern from the interrogative 'subject's' means of epistemic access to them; a task that is

rendered both implausible and politically suspect by the insights surveyed above. If I'm right about these problems, however, then we must replace the naturalist's ideal of the God's Eye View with a norm which takes more seriously that the world cannot be unproblematically objectified from an acosmic standpoint. To appreciate how Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology may provide such a norm in the form of a 'view-from-everywhere', however, it is necessary to first shift gear and retrace a key insight from chapter two.

4.2.1 Seeing Things

I've previously suggested that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology's unique ability to resist objective thought comes through its observation that perceptual content is positively indeterminate. For Merleau-Ponty, reality is expressed through a Gestalt structure which draws upon the world's normative impetus and the contribution of the situated body-subject. In this Gestalt context, meanings can only be expressed in virtue of the diacritical relationships they enjoy within the overall perceptual field⁵³. Even a carpet's redness or the odour of mammalian blood, Merleau-Ponty argues, cannot be entirely separated from one's differential embodied expectations of the world, and one's expectations are intimately linked to one's multifaceted intentional relations with it. For Merleau-Ponty, perceptual background is, therefore, normatively salient to the meaningful physiognomy of the intentional objects that perception culminates in, because the background "directs my gaze and causes me to see the object" (*PP*, p.310) with the character I do. Background *is* perceived as a field-quality, if not as a determinate 'thing' in its own right.

This fundamental insight is missed where we unduly grant naturalism—as a manifestation of objective thought—the privileged ontological and epistemological status we ordinarily do. Naturalism backgrounds (in Plumwood's sense) its own diacritics (its (meta-)theoretical assumptions, intentional commitments, projects, and so on) and justifies this move through an insular dialectic which limits ontological reality to the modality of the in-itself. Now, although his own project lacks an environmental focus, I think that the seeds for a more positive onto-epistemological norm can be found in Sean Kelly's (2004) exploration of how the aforementioned figure-background relations function in permitting us to perceive 'objects' at all. I shall, therefore, first explore Kelly's account before addressing its ecophenomenological repercussions.

⁵³ Alia Al-Saji separates contributory conditions into the following categories: "diacritical, social, historical and material", but holds that, since situated perceivers cannot be isolated from their participation in a Gestalt, "it is impossible to separate them" (2009, pp.377-380). My references to 'diacritics' are, therefore, shorthand for all of the above.

Kelly's primary task is to understand Merleau-Ponty's account of how humans perceive substantive 'objects' (by which he means any ostensibly discrete three-dimensional entity: trees, crates, beluga whales, and so on) and, more importantly, how we come to perceive them *better*, despite our partial perspective. His main example is of an old Western film set. On entering the set, one might see certain buildings: the saloon, jail, and the like. Once one has explored extensively and returned to the same spot, however, despite the same 'objective' visual panorama presenting itself (i.e. certain frontages with closed doors), the set looks—and, indeed, *is*—different. One now perceives façades, rather than buildings because of the Gestalt-shift inaugurated by one's frustrated expectations during one's failed exploration of the saloon and jail's interiors.

Kelly's point isn't simply that one's perception *changes* in this example. Given that the revision yields a more accurate perception of the set, *progress* has clearly been made through the Gestalt-shift. Kelly suggests that, for Merleau-Ponty, this is because, in perceptual acts, one is always already implicitly involved with a position of optimality which, in the case above, one has progressed towards. Moreover, Kelly contends, the derivative quality of one's own perspective from this optimum is phenomenologically available. Kelly's sounds like a strange claim, but he employs some compelling cases to support it. There *are* increasingly optimal distances to stand from a painting to grasp its detail or better appreciate its chiaroscuro, and we seek the optimum when we shift our position in its vicinity. Likewise, there are increasingly optimal lighting conditions under which to more fully discern a fabric's true colour. This explains why we often get frustrated with the poor lighting in department store changing rooms. In each case, one's embodied gaze appears to be drawn by the normative background to a more accurate or sharper presentation of the 'object' in question. As Kelly puts it: "I see how the lighting *should* change in order for me to see the colour better" (2004, p.83).

Kelly emphasizes that there is an intimate tripartite relationship between figure, background, and one's body involved in any progression towards perceptual optimality. Take our example of colour perception. One is only ever 'objectively' party to determinate, perspectival instantiations of lighting and colours, yet one unavoidably perceives the constant, '*real*' colour, differently situated. This forms the normative background of any further experience with the colour in question (e.g. as being 'distorted by poor lighting' or 'overlaid with shadows'). But for Merleau-Ponty, any such normativity must be intimately linked to one's embodied *grasp*, given that perception's differential intentional character is tied to one's comportment within the world and the guiding expectations therein. For Merleau-Ponty, Kelly suggests, these optimal background norms must, therefore, be accessed at the immediate, pre-

reflective, bodily level in the form of something like a *maximum* grasp one *might* have on the feature in question. For his part, Merleau-Ponty contends that “[t]he real colour persists beneath appearances as the background persists beneath the figure, not as a seen or thought-of quality, but through a non-sensory presence” (*PP*, p.305). Which is to say that the ‘real colour’ is implicitly determined with reference to “the colour that is optimally illuminated by the lighting norm, and this lighting norm is never determinately experienced” (Kelly, 2004, p.88).

As Kelly (2004, p.91) makes clear, however, there is a relevant disanalogy between perceiving colours and three-dimensional objects because the optimal position to observe the latter cannot be even ideally instantiated. To see the film set optimally, for instance, is to see it from *everywhere*, because each perspective reveals some otherwise unavailable feature (*PP*, p.69). A literal view-from-everywhere is, however, impossible for any situated perceiver to possess, and all perception is irreducibly situated:

I say that I perceive correctly when my body has a precise hold on the spectacle, but that doesn’t mean that my hold is ever all-embracing; it would be so only if I had succeeded in reducing to a state of articulate perception all the inner and outer horizons of the object, which is in principle impossible.

(*PP*, p.297)

Nonetheless, Kelly contends that “although it is not itself achievable by me, the view-from-everywhere is nevertheless an ideal from which I sense myself to be deviating in acts of perception. It is the *norm*... with respect to which all actual points of view are understood” (2004, p.92). Insofar as one may perceive a substantive saloon-object, for instance, one’s perception is already partly constituted by reference to its hidden sides in much the same way that the redness of a fabric involves reference to how it would appear under optimal lighting conditions.

Sachs therefore argues that, for Merleau-Ponty, three-dimensional objects are perceived “in full” because their “non-facing sides are perceptually present to us in the mode of [counterfactual] *possibilities*” (2017, p.92). One’s perception of the saloon includes how the saloon would look if one somehow ‘took up’ the position of the jail, for instance. Kelly (2004, pp.80-81; p.100) rightly argues, however, that any such possibilities cannot merely be how the hidden sides would look *if I* went and stood there (as Husserl claims), because those other perspectives are manifest, constituent parts of my current perception. They are partly constitutive of what it is to *see* (rather than, as Husserl suggests, hypothesize) a three-

dimensional object at all. Kelly's claim is exemplified in the following passage from Merleau-Ponty:

To see is to enter a universe of beings which *display themselves*... to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from behind this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But insofar as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision.

(PP, p.68)

The present perspectives of other entities (in which one may be lodged, and which are licenced by the 'object'), then, partly delineate the normative background of the intentional objects that perception reveals, because "every object is the mirror of all others" (PP, p.68). For Merleau-Ponty, Kelly argues, the *view-from-everywhere* is, therefore, the implicit optimum that all factual perception is derivative of. It is by better satisfying the demands of this norm (minimally: by more accurately appreciating how the saloon's hidden sides look) that we come to perceive things *better*⁵⁴.

4.2.2 The View-from-Everywhere

But how does any of this help to establish the view-from-everywhere's credentials as a nonobjectivistic onto-epistemological norm? To answer this question, it's important to appreciate that Kelly limits himself to exploring how *objects* might be revealed as three-dimensional wholes to *human* perceivers, through our "full bodily readiness" (2004, p.101) to navigate them. More-or-less: how nonhuman things show up as substantive objects in our everyday utilitarian praxis. Kelly, understandably, has little to say, therefore, about how more-than-human entities might resist this sort of objectification where they are addressed under different modes of intentional engagement. Nevertheless, as an investigation of the normative character of phenomenal experience, Kelly's basic argument rings true. Moreover, I think we

⁵⁴ The occasional 'shattering' of reality's normative content seen in the film set example cannot, however, licence a broader scepticism. Merleau-Ponty argues that the paradox of our unshakeable "primordial faith" is that "[t]here is the absolute certainty of the world in general, but not of any one thing in particular" (PP, p.297; p.409). One's grasp of 'reality' can only be sacrificed where there is a "truer" (PP, p.360) one to take its place. Likewise: "when I say that I see the ash tray over there, I suppose as completed a whole perceptual future. Similarly, when I say that I know and like someone, I aim, beyond his qualities, at an inexhaustible ground which may one day shatter the image I have formed of him. This is the price for there being things and 'other people' for us, not as the result of some illusion, but as the result of the violent act which is perception itself" (PP, p.361). Merleau-Ponty refers to perception as a 'violent act' here in recognition of its irreducibly situated, partial, and provisional character.

can plausibly extend his analysis to accommodate the other kinds of ontologically real meanings that our analyses over the preceding chapters legitimate.

To explain: both Merleau-Ponty and Kelly take the view-from-everywhere to refer to the sum of *all* interior and exterior horizons under which something might be truly expressed. I've argued that no objectivistic mode of revealing could wholly satisfy this demand since, even insofar as the revelations permitted by any such purview may be true, their apparatuses and assumptions exclude other meanings plausibly licenced by the more-than-human world itself. Uexküll's ticks, for instance, don't obviously experience raisins *as* intentional objects, so it is misleading (and somewhat colonial) to take the worldly phenomena *we* designate as 'raisins' to be exhausted by the multitude of raisin-object perspectives. Doing so would reinstate the prejudices licenced by objective thought because the meaningful phenomena in question would be effectively reducible to the perspectives *like mine* in which they can differentially feature as objects.

Given that the above error is paradigmatically Kuhnian, it's unsurprising that things are much the same in the scientific context. Atmospheric chemists like Crutzen offer observations about greenhouse gas emissions and their implications for anthropogenic climate change which are, for the most part, evidently true. Moreover, their observations are *essential* to understand our crisis situation, since they unpack some of the plausible causal relationships between fossil fuel consumption, carbon dioxide emissions, desertification, ecosystem collapse, and so on. Crutzen's discipline may also play an important role in addressing anthropogenic climate change through its capacity to model alternative resource allocation strategies, cleaner fuel sources, and the like. However, we face two familiar problems in taking anthropogenic climate change or its constituent aspects to *be reducible to* narrow causal relationships between the determinate extensional properties of atmospheric gases, ultraviolet radiation, multicellular organisms, and the like. The first is that, by taking science's positivistic remit to exhaust the boundary conditions of ontological and epistemological enquiry, natural scientists *cannot* register heterogenous meanings or horizons like those surveyed in section 4.1 which violate its more fundamentally objectivistic demands. The second issue is that, by taking its reflective abstractions to be ontologically primary, science limits or distorts the (allegedly determinate and wholly-determinable) phenomena it can. This issue cannot, however, be resolved by taking multiple scientific perspectives to exhaust the phenomena in question, as our investigation of Warren's hierarchy theory in chapter three illustrates. To reprise an insight from chapter two, the most we can say is that, insofar as Crutzen's observations ring true, their truth cannot be entirely separated from the intentional projects, assumptions, and apparatuses under which they are configured.

I've suggested that it is, therefore, both false and deeply problematic to mistake the various regional truths natural science yields—either individually or collectively—for an exhaustive account of (a given aspect of) the more-than-human world. I say, 'deeply problematic' because, by taking the entities scientists reveal to *exhaust* the world's 'objective' furniture, one risks naturalizing science's more troubling utilitarian or dualistic assumptions, and these are incompatible with disrupting the underpinning violence of the environmental crisis. To reiterate: the point isn't that natural science's contentions aren't true, but that there are other intentional horizons which *really* may yield different meaningful phenomena. It is only via a problematic commitment to naturalism's objectivistic prejudices that one may outright deny these this richer range of phenomena their place in any view-from-everywhere.

Now, if one really were to somehow perceive all the interior and exterior horizons of an entity (a rainforest, perhaps), one's perspective would include all the (radically) different meaningful expressions which that entity truly motivates, as well as any intentional meanings which the entity *itself* may express⁵⁵. Articulating each of these would be impossible, but here's a selection: from certain economic perspectives, the rainforest might be a fuel or capital resource, perhaps with further axiological meanings that are 'objectively' impossible with those available from alternate viewpoints. As Brown notes, "clear-cutting large tracks of old-growth forest may [therefore] appear good from the perspective of business and profit whilst appearing evil from the perspective of wildlife habitat preservation" (2003, p.11). These axiological meanings, of course, cannot show up under Crutzen's schema because they cannot be registered by the extensional realist apparatuses which regulate objectivity within that field. As I hope to have shown above, however, our list must also include more radically different meanings. "Taken in itself—and as an object it demands to be taken thus" (*PP*, p.70), a view-from-everywhere should, by right, also include the differential meaningful expressions motivated by the rainforest, such as those configured by other (differently engaged) humans, orangutans, individual trees, compound forest ecosystems, earthworms, and perhaps even minimal cellular entities.

This list would be a long one and, in fact, the task of exhaustively articulating each of the rainforest's meanings is *impossible*. I've argued at length that, given our intractable situatedness, *some* meanings will be unavailable to us on their own terms, such as the *entire* intentional reality of the dog, tick, orangutan, or tree. One may have a degree of epistemic access to the intentional realities of more-than-human Others with which one is connatural. Nevertheless, taking alterity seriously precludes full transcendental access to them. In the

⁵⁵ Whilst I speak of the rainforest as 'an entity', it may, of course, be different or multiple entities from some perspectives and no entity at all from others.

same manner that I cannot wholly know how ‘raisins’ (don’t) show up for ticks, I cannot wholly know how the ‘rainforest’ shows up for its primate inhabitants or other differently situated body-subjects. Nor can I legitimately or consistently hope to exorcise those meanings from the world. This is why Merleau-Ponty calls any given true expression only “a certain accent of the world’s style” (*PP*, p.406). I address the issue of alterity more fully over the next three chapters, but it will suffice to say for now that, under any anticolonial view-from-everywhere, there must be a *revealing* excess which a situated body-subject cannot grasp *except as an excess* without doing undue violence to alterity.

But such an excess shouldn’t be admitted to our view-from-everywhere only to acknowledge the intentional realities of (nonhuman) Others. Taking Bennett’s insights seriously, a further excess is required to acknowledge the (quasi-)agency retained by the trees, rainforest ecosystem, its nonhuman inhabitants, and so on. We can better appreciate Bennett’s point in the context of another ‘issue’ associated with the environmental crisis: coltan mining.

Coltan is a metallic ore which is an important ingredient in manufacturing surgical equipment and mobile telephones. However, the commonplace practice of pan-mining coltan produces toxic by-products which, in developing countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, are typically left to pollute water sources and destabilize local ecosystems. Coltan mining is also directly implicated in deforestation, the destruction of stream beds, the collapse of more sustainable local agriculture, and the hunting to near extinction of mountain gorillas (Bleischwitz *et al*, 2015, p.159; Plumpton *et al*, 2002, pp.420-1). The final issue arises because coltan mines tend to be far from existent food sources and so (to borrow markedly technoscientific terms) huge quantities of ‘bushmeat’ ‘fuel’ its excavation. Now, even setting aside the many other obvious aspects of this picture which cannot be captured ‘objectively’, existing scientific descriptions of it typically err by taking concrete instances of coltan mining to consist of *ideally-predictable* relationships between physico-chemical properties or systems. According to this sort of purview, the negative effects of coltan mining would be entirely foreseeable (and, presumably, largely mitigable) with the assistance of a sufficiently advanced and sophisticated set of sciences.

There is, of course, a kernel of truth in this sort of position. If natural science had been in the same position in the 1780s as it is now, we’d no doubt have some better idea about the likelihood that anthropogenic climate change and ecosystem collapse might result from a shift from agrarian to industrial societies. It’s also possible that we might have legislated differently for subsequent industries like coltan mining. Nevertheless, if Bennett’s contentions are on the right lines, then the dominant scientific picture is dangerously simplistic because it is ill-

equipped to acknowledge the ‘thing power’ possessed by its contributory bodies and the collectives they form. In fact, the reason I chose the example of coltan mining is that a closely-related situation *did* lead, in a not-wholly predictable manner, to the emergence and globalization of HIV-1.

In the early twentieth century, many Congolese nationals under Belgian colonial rule were conscripted to work in rubber plants or to build railways for the transportation of goods. A combination of enforced monoculture (land was taken from crop farmers to satisfy rubber demands) and huge nutritional requirements (thousands of migrant workers built the railways) jointly ensured food scarcity. This industrial hub then incubated a mosaic of interconnected factors which seem to have jointly led to the transmission of HIV-1: malnourished workers, who sought out chimpanzees to satisfy their hunger; unsafe food preparation methods; a prevalence of chimpanzees infected with Simian Immunodeficiency Virus (SIV); SIV’s more discrete quasi-agentic capacity to evolve into HIV-1 and permit human transmission; an increase in commercial sex workers; and a newly constructed large-scale transportation system to name a few⁵⁶.

The similarities between situations are striking. So, if, as Bennett would surely agree, the transmission and globalization of HIV-1 is more-or-less inexplicable without reference to the quasi-agency variously manifested above, then the same might be said about the present coltan mining situation. Worryingly, we can reach this conclusion without mentioning the profound repercussions that scientists tell us probably *will* result from ecosystem collapse or water pollution in those regions. Taking Bennett’s contentions seriously, then, I submit that the agency retained by waste deposits, slime moulds, power plants, crystals, and HIV-1 *must* show up as a *real* excess in any account of these things in which anthropogenic mastery is truly decentred.

So, what’s the moral of my story? I’ve argued that, since the more-than-human world cannot be unproblematically confined to a purified order of ‘objects’, then the naturalist’s God’s Eye View should be replaced with a view-from-everywhere. However, a view-from-everywhere that is sufficiently self-critical to disrupt our imposition of conceptual violence cannot limit itself to the truths revealed by multiple scientific or objectivistic schemas. Insofar as the meanings revealed by these schemas may be true, their reductive assumptions lead them to exclude some of the ontologically real phenomena available for expression, some of which cannot be wholly thematised without significant distortion, except as an excess. Nonetheless,

⁵⁶ See Brown (2015) for an excellent account.

these excesses must be retained if, as Kelly's film set example suggests, seeing *better* involves more fully appreciating the various meanings that an entity itself truly permits.

What adherence to this revised view-from-everywhere *does* mean is that the more-than-human world cannot be ontologically or epistemologically *possessed* in any totalizing manner. The world cannot, after all, be reduced to a collection of natural resources, ecosystem services, or any of the 'objects' which show up within a given intentional horizon. Nevertheless, I've argued over the past three chapters that the failure of a project of mastery shouldn't give us cause for regret. It should serve to inculcate a radical sort of critical self-reflexivity about our imposition of conceptual and, ultimately, behavioural violence onto the more-than-human world. According to the line of argument I've been pursuing, it is principally by reducing one's imposition of epistemological and ontological violence that one comes to perceive and relate to the more-than-human world *better*. By helping to facilitating a shift from mastery to humility, ecophenomenology might also thereby help to disrupt the submerged mass of our crisis situation.

4.3 Better Habits

In the broadest possible terms, I've argued that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is particularly well-situated to address our imposition of violence because of its demand for radical critical self-reflexivity about the various implications of being a situated body-subject. But, in the discussion above, I left an important thread largely unattended. Taking embodiment seriously *at all levels* also requires acknowledging that we learn to perceive and relate to the phenomena we encounter as a matter of embodied *habit*. In chapters two and three, recall, I argued that identifying sedimented perceptual habits is important for understanding why, even as environmental philosophers, we frequently enframe the more-than-human world under misleadingly objectivistic or technoscientific terms. The root problem, I suggested, isn't merely the pervasive influence of scientific ontologies and epistemologies *per se*, but rather that, in its role as *the* privileged discourse, natural science legitimates a problematic kind of objectification that is partly underpinned by dualistic political sediment and a related adherence to the metaphysical prejudices licenced by objective thought. Both are, at least in significant part, *learnt* ways of perceiving the world which have come to predominate, but to which we nevertheless remain significantly tied—at an operative level—as a matter of habit.

Emphasizing that perception is both habitual and imbued with the sediment of one's multifaceted situation is important. In chapter three, I suggested that the 'solutions' many ecofeminists offer to dualism should be reconsidered because dualism cannot plausibly be overcome by mere assent to a more positive conceptual scheme. Acknowledging embodied

perceptual habits might also prove similarly problematic, however, for my recommendation to take up a less objectivistic or dualistic view-from-everywhere. One cannot simply reflectively transcend the normative sediment of one's situation and just begin to perceive and relate to the world better because, as we saw Kohák argue in the previous chapter, objectifying and commodifying the more-than-human world has become a staple of our habitual *praxis*. Therein lies the limitation of radical reflection where it is conceived only as a conceptual tool. Kohák contends that, whilst from within the confines of one's 'urban' situation one might become aware of one's imposition of onto-epistemic violence in rare moments of reflective clarity, given that this is when one is often *least engaged* with the world, these are unlikely to impact on our attitudes or behaviours in any profound or lasting manner. Yet, this is the sort of change we need to effect if we're to address our crisis situation at root.

So, the residual thread is as follows: regardless of any formal commitment to a revised view-from-everywhere, how can one prevent oneself from slipping back into habitually enframing the world in objectivistic and utilitarian ways? The answer, I suggested in chapter two, must lie in developing the means to sustain a *praxis* of radical reflection; to somehow instil the requisite habitus of critique to identify and resist the violence done in normalizing or naturalizing objectivistic ways of revealing, especially where these are taken to exhaustively describe the world. In this chapter's final section, I shall entertain some suggestions about how to do so.

4.3.1 Attention

On the face of things, the answer is simple. One must cultivate the virtue of *attention* to the things themselves. Attempting to do so was the motivation behind Plumwood and Bennett's advocacy of openness or care as improved modes of epistemic engagement. Merleau-Ponty makes similar remarks when he contends that phenomenology is epitomised by its "painstaking... kind of attentiveness" and the "demand for awareness" that motivates our openness to "*being filled with wonder*" by the phenomena *themselves* (PP, p.xiv; p.xxi). For Merleau-Ponty, an ongoing attitude of attentiveness facilitates radical reflection. The habitual inattentiveness cultivated under dualism, for instance, frustrates it. These remarks aside, our question then becomes: 'how can one cultivate attentiveness in the requisite manner?'

Bennett's account of 'American materialism' above suggests that our tendencies to uncritically objectify things may be licenced, in part, by an unreflective familiarity with them. This contention is entirely consistent with the analyses contained in the preceding chapters. Where one is sufficiently familiar with entities that are intersubjectively characterized as 'tools' or 'use-objects' (whether technoscientifically, or in a more everyday consumeristic

context) it seems that their utilitarian meanings may be sedimented into one's intentional arc. But this gives us a problem. Since our bodily modes of revealing are our medium for having a world at all, these sedimented contributions to the diacritical structures of perception don't reveal themselves amongst the objects we experience, nor are they straightforwardly transparent to reflection. Alia Al-Saji puts this concern as follows: "We see *through* our habits, through our eye movements and bodily kinesthesia; we do not see them. This self-erasure is what allows habits, once acquired, to appear effortless and 'natural'" (2009, p.378). As with the blind person accustomed to her cane, familiarity with our 'tools' (including any sedimented intentional commitments) actively *distracts* our attention from our appropriation of them, since our unreflective familiarity "*relieves us of the necessity of doing so*" (PP, p.364). In *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty expressly links this process of instrumental appropriation with the potential for colonialism:

consciousness can do nothing without its body and can only act upon others by acting upon their bodies, it can only reduce them to slavery by making nature an appendix of its body, by appropriating nature to itself, and establishing in nature its instruments of power.

(HT, p.102)

Revelations like the above lead Kohák (1984, p.23) and Simon James (2009, p.152) to vouch in favour of distancing oneself from the most clearly artefactual world. Whilst the former literally prescribes fleeing to (and remaining in) the woods, the latter prescribes periodic breaks from "merely functional" entities because what James calls "encounters with nature... can help one develop the attention which is the mark of phenomenological inquiry done well" (2009, pp.105-8)⁵⁷. This is because the least markedly artefactual things—unlike consumer goods like cars, televisions, or mobile telephones—aren't *so* finely-tuned or ergonomically-crafted to quietly satisfy our use for them. By surrounding ourselves with things that resist our appropriation of them, the argument goes, our objectifying habits may be sufficiently disrupted to afford the requisite epistemic space in which things may begin to hold our attention. We might spend some time surrounded by cedar trees, for instance, which might satisfy some fuel or engineering needs, but not without a significant amount of manual labour. Nor, in this sort of face-to-face setting, will they typically disclose themselves *wholly* as

⁵⁷ 'Nature' doesn't here connote 'untended wilderness' in the problematic sense implied by Crutzen and Arias-Maldonado. It refers to those things which haven't *obviously* been constructed with a functional capacity in mind. Whilst 'nature' and the 'non-natural' are both intersubjectively characterized, on this issue at least, we should accept James' distinction as it relates to the difference between an Everglade swamp and a mobile telephone.

‘natural resources’, and this sort of functional break might serve to cultivate phenomenological attentiveness.

Whilst the above rings true, we might nevertheless have some reservations about James and Kohák’s specific proposals. The first emerges in the context of Bennett’s rubbish: namely, that one must take care to address the inorganic or ‘functional’ world with the same attention that one affords imposing Sequoia trees, glaciers, or mountain ranges that more readily command one’s attention. By cultivating ‘natural’ attention at the expense of the ‘cultural’, however, we at least risk perpetuating the dualistic separation which underwrites some of our problematic relations with the more-than-human world in the first place. It’s not clear, after all, that a month-long retreat in a secluded forest or mountain foothill would do much to improve one’s attention to the quasi-agency of waste plastic upon one’s return to an urban setting, for instance. Nor would this retreat obviously heighten one’s attention to other legitimate perspectives on those consumer goods—including one’s coltan-powered mobile telephone—which don’t so readily resist instrumentalization.

Then perhaps we should take the imperative to retreat in Kohák’s stronger sense of ‘opting out’ of urban experience. But this gives us a second problem. Since most of the aforementioned violent behaviours (e.g. unsustainable fossil fuel consumption, vast increases in consumer waste, or the rapid expansion of urban infrastructure) concern our relationships within the primarily ‘functional’ world, then fleeing to the woods won’t much help us to address them. Baldly put: by heeding Kohák’s imperative, even if one might become more attentive to one’s *own* imposition of conceptual violence, one will be so far removed from the more pressing intersubjective, ‘urban’ concerns as to be almost entirely ineffectual in their disruption. It seems that sojourns into nature in James’ sense can be, at most, part-time therapy for the task of attending to the attitudes, behaviours, and assumptions which epitomise the ‘functional’ world we’ve constructed.

4.3.2 Hesitation

What we really need are some better means of cultivating attention from *within* the ‘functional world’. Al-Saji aims to locate these via her re-reading of Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of painting in his late essay ‘Eye and Mind’. The reason that Al-Saji ostensibly bases important political and philosophical considerations on aesthetic or vocational ones is that the painter occupies a different sort of epistemic role. The painter is often distracted from the world in the purely functional sense because her primary concern is to see; “seeing is not subsumed to the ends of objectivating, goal-oriented action” (2009, p.380). Painting is thus able to “take otherness as its motive rather than its object” (2009, p.388). Cézanne’s painting, Merleau-

Ponty argues, “suspends [objectifying] habits and reveals the base of the inhuman nature upon which man [sic] has installed himself” (*EM*, p.76). As James (2009, p.108) notes, we see a related sentiment echoed by Heidegger in his analysis of van Gogh’s painting of a peasant’s shoes. Van Gogh’s painting reveals something meaningful about the peasant’s dialectic with the world she inhabits and, at least according to Al-Saji, about the social and political structures which shape that dialectic. As for the shoes themselves, the peasant, unlike the painter, doesn’t hesitate sufficiently to make the relevant functional break and so she “simply wears them” (Heidegger, 1996, p.160).

Unlike in Kohák’s model, then, Merleau-Ponty’s painter isn’t

disconnected from the world, with all that this implies of distance and retreat. Rather, the painter’s vision displays a different kind of attention to the world, to visibility and to life. It is an attention that seeks to remain within the proximity of seeing and seen, and tries to decenter, to question, this relation from within.

(Al-Saji, 2009, p.380)

What Al-Saji means to say is that even objectifying perception is already, in some sense, habitually attentive. But this sort of attention is centred on the *objects* that show up only against the background of the pervasive social and political influences we’ve explored. That background cannot, however, be registered as ontologically real within the naturalized discourse of extensional realism that, somewhat paradoxically, those commitments demand. Of course, the painter, like the peasant, is always concretely situated within a (somewhat similar) lifeworld, so her attention cannot result from bracketing her intentional commitments in a disinterested manner. Rather, the painter’s “attention takes the form of hesitation; for it is hesitation that creates an opening in habits and makes them visible for themselves and within the world” (Al-Saji, 2009, p.380). What Al-Saji has in mind, then, is that painterly attention disrupts the unreflective utilitarian attitude of the ‘I can’ from within⁵⁸. Painterly hesitation is important, Al-Saji thinks, because it allows one to glimpse some of the diacritical—and particularly socio-historical—structures which are generative of the ‘objects’ perceived by painter and peasant alike⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ James (2009, pp.114-5) argues that whilst hesitation may hinder unflinching environmental activism, such activism may only serve to protect the *objects* of our concern: the things which are disappearing (e.g. rainforests, axolotls, mountain gorillas, or biodiversity). However, James argues, there is a subtler loss quietly suffered whereby we subsume the more-than-human world into our objectivistic and utilitarian schemas, which hesitation may help to stem. Like Evernden, James thinks we cannot really prevent the former loss without attending to the latter.

⁵⁹ Of course, objectivistic modes of revealing cannot be *reduced* to their social and political influences. Alcott argues that objective thought repeats a problem common to ocularcentric

Al-Saji's point is subtler than to suggest that we must become painters if we're to tackle patriarchy or climate change. She's really interested in *how* it is that the painter comes to be attentive to the diacritics of perception, rather than merely to the objects that perception terminates in. On Al-Saji's account, the painter's hesitation is possible due to her *affective* openness to the dimensions generative of objectifying vision. But this affective awareness isn't limited to Cézanne or van Gogh. Al-Saji argues that (at least as a human body-subject) one is *always* affectively open to some of the background diacritics of perception. Kelly's account of perceptual normativity neatly demonstrates this. Even from within the somewhat objectivistic or utilitarian purview that Kelly explores, one must be at least pre-theoretically aware of some account of the 'hidden sides' of the saloon's façade if one is to see it as a saloon-object at all. Without this sort of affective awareness, to reiterate, it's hard to see how one's perception of the film set could change (let alone improve) in the manner that Kelly, rightly, suggests.

Nonetheless, Al-Saji's claim is contentious insofar as she holds that the scope of one's affective awareness is much wider than Kelly implies. Al-Saji contends that we must retain at least an affective awareness of some of the social and political dimensions generative of our propensity to perceive entities objectivistically. This is because the background *abjection* of those dimensions is partly constitutive of the physiognomy of the objects that may be registered by such a purview in the first place. Put otherwise: even if one isn't aware of dualistic logic *as* dualistic logic, for instance, the affective *weight* of its assumptions and commitments is already felt, albeit implicitly, in the purportedly basic revelation of a world exhaustively furnished by determinate objects-in-themselves. Al-Saji is suggesting, then, that insofar as one may objectify the more-than-human world at all, one must be to some degree affectively aware that one is backgrounding—in a radically Plumwoodian sense—the constituent aspects of that perception which cannot show up as objects-in-themselves.

This is a strong claim and Al-Saji's arguments for it are highly technical, but her basic point can be illustrated with a couple of examples. Al-Saji (2009, p.389) appeals to our pre-theoretical awareness of the kind of intersubjectively sedimented structures (regarding the requisite ontological commitments to see races as natural kinds, for instance) that we saw Heinämaa and Alcoff point to in chapter two. We become reflectively aware of the affective weight these implicit commitments have in perception via the residual intentional 'pull' they retain, even when they are disrupted (by reading Alcoff's work, for example). A more

epistemologies: that "[w]hat cannot be 'made totally visible and clear' may disappear, altogether, from consciousness" (2006, p.198). Ocularcentrism is particularly well-suited to perpetuate the illusion of transcendence which licences objectivistic ways of revealing because one rarely perceives the motor contributions of one's own eyes.

straightforward example concerns the abjection of other “unfamiliar” or “exotic” viewpoints which nevertheless—to use Judith Butler’s term—form objectifying vision’s “constitutive outside” (Al-Saji, 2009, p.389). We perhaps see *this* kind of abjection most clearly in Taiz’s objection to floral intentionality. Seeing plants in the mechanistic manner Taiz does requires *not* seeing them as intentional, because the two purviews are ‘objectively’ impossible. They are irreconcilable according to the background assumptions and commitments which underwrite mechanism. Nonetheless, Taiz’s abjection of ‘other’ viewpoints forms a constitutive part of Taiz’s objectifying vision, more-or-less because seeing only objects requires *not* seeing intentions.

Nevertheless, this leaves aside why Al-Saji thinks each of us must be already be affectively *aware* of the diacritical structures of perception before we reflectively uncover them. Al-Saji’s reasoning is simple: if perception is irreducibly intentional *and* habitual, then some affective awareness of the background of perception is required to provide the means of establishing *different* embodied habits. I’ve suggested that one might *come to see* the world as reducible to a collection of ‘natural resources’, or plants as biological machines, for example. However, to develop these differential operative habits, one’s body must be, at some level, both open to the influence of new intentional structures *and* able to retain (at least in a motor sense) the dimensions of antecedent structures as intentional sediment. Without some affective awareness—which is precluded by a reflex arc account, for instance—this intentional habituation wouldn’t be possible. There must, then, Al-Saji suggests, be a certain “*indeterminacy* of habit” which, whilst it “cannot be captured in the logic of objects”, cannot be falsified by this contention, since this sort of affective indeterminacy is required to explain how one comes to acquire the very naturalistic viewpoint that denies it (2009, p.382). I take Al-Saji to be suggesting, then, that, whilst dualistic and objectivistic prejudices may be ontologically inseparable from the worlds that most of us presently inhabit, the means to disrupt the diacritical structures of dualistic or objectivistic perception exist within us in the form of habitual indeterminacy. Which is to say that the very affective means by which we acquire objectivistic sediment as part of our habitual grasp of the world provide the means to develop better habits, because bodies must be fundamentally amenable to change.

Nonetheless, the above discussion neglects *how* we’re to develop habits of painterly attention in the requisite manner to get a praxis of radical reflection off the ground. After all, the problem we’re exploring here is that, as pre-reflective, any such affective awareness needn’t be consciously available to us in the sense necessary to instigate acts of radical reflection. But this is only partly true. There *are* occasions when one becomes more consciously aware (albeit only marginally) of phenomena which cannot be accommodated

without a shift in one's background assumptions and intentional commitments⁶⁰. Al-Saji calls these disruptive events "inassimilable" (2009, p.390), and Alcoff and Taiz provide neat examples of them. But various other inassimilable events have punctuated this thesis, such as Bennett's experience of nonsubjects revealing their own quasi-agency, or Uexküll's frustrated attempt to wholly grasp tick temporality. In each of these cases, the body-subject experiences a dissonance between the phenomena which appear to reveal themselves and their own background commitments. In the face of such dissonance, one cannot help but to hesitate and, thus, open some epistemic space for reflection, if (as Kohák claims) only momentarily.

The above, I think, provides us with the requisite architecture for an account of how, despite the weight of objectivistic and dualistic sediment, one may come to instil a praxis of radical reflection that might erode one's entrenched violent tendencies. So, let's put it all back together. Al-Saji has suggested that, as body-subjects, we're occasionally faced with inassimilable events, which lead us hesitate and bring some of our intentional commitments (i.e. those which are problematized by that event) to our attention. This hesitation provides the requisite epistemic space for critical self-reflexivity. When faced with inassimilable events, one may reject the inassimilable meanings as unreal (as Taiz does). However, where one admits their reality, but cannot reconcile them with one's current commitments, one can either retain the status quo (a "pathological" response, but one which may be the norm under dualism), or else try to encourage marginal awareness of these new revelations to infuse one's world in much the same way that one's perceptual field reorganized to admit the grey squares, shipwreck, or façades (Al-Saji, 2009, p.388). Through a radically-reflective habitus of critique licenced by moments of hesitation, the latter option is possible, if somewhat difficult. To clarify: I say that such a habitus is *possible* because one only need respond to inassimilable events by being radically-reflective about the background commitments to which one is already sensitive. Doing so to some extent appears, at least to my mind, to be within the scope of autonomy as it presents itself phenomenologically. Given that embodied habits are indeterminate, where one hesitates with sufficient regularity, one may begin to disrupt one's objectifying habits and inculcate the radically-reflective sort of humility that is better equipped to address the residual violence secreted in one's (always provisional) view-from-everywhere.

Nonetheless, given Kohák, Alcoff, and Bennett's concerns about the link between intentional concern and volitional self-reflexivity, shouldn't we be more pessimistic? The answer, I think, is no. Addressing the objectifying habits involved in reifying races as natural

⁶⁰ Marginal awareness isn't (yet) fully thematised, and so yields no straightforward intentional *object*. Retaining marginal awareness of inassimilable meanings and commitments is important because, if we're aware of them only as fully-fledged intentional objects, we risk reflectively reinscribing the objectivistic distortions that Al-Saji prescribes hesitation to disrupt.

kinds, Alcoff herself—who, remember, raised the concern about volitional self-reflexivity—says the following:

The multiple schemas operating in many if not most social spaces today would mitigate against an absolute determinism and thus pessimism. Perceptual practices are dynamic even when congealed into habit, and that dynamism can be activated by the existence of multiple forms of the gaze in various cultural productions and by the challenge of contradictory perceptions. To put it simply, people are capable of change. Merleau-Ponty's analysis helps to provide a more accurate understanding of where—that is, at what level of experience—change needs to occur.

(2006, p.189)

Given that there are a variety of conceptual and perceptual schemas at play in even ‘urban experience’, there will probably be a wealth of inassimilable events which have the potential, where we aren’t *entirely* pathological, to afford opportunities for radical reflection. I shall explore some of them in chapter six. Moreover, given our complex identities of oppression and privilege, we have reason to think that each of us will be subject to inassimilable events on a semi-regular basis. Furthermore, given the indeterminacy of habit, it is *possible* to gradually become more open to such events where one, like the painter, makes a concerted effort to become more prone to hesitate. Where hesitation permits radical critical self-reflexivity, and particularly where one uses that hesitation to cultivate openness to further inassimilable events, this would seem to afford optimism about the potential that the radically-reflective ecophenomenologist might *better* perceive and engage with the more than human world as a matter of praxis.

4.4 Conclusions

We’ve covered a lot of ground that we should recap. We first investigated how an ecophenomenology informed by ecofeminist and new materialist insights might provide some means of better addressing the world on its own, rich terms. I suggested that radical reflection reveals scientific naturalism’s reflective purification of ‘subject’ from ‘object’ to be badly made insofar as it underplays important continuities in the mindlike properties shared between human and nonhuman parties. By taking these subject-object isomorphisms and crossovers more seriously, I argued, we disrupt the assumed ‘objectivity’ of the dualistic denigration of ‘mere nature’. But perhaps more importantly, because epistemic ‘subjects’ cannot be entirely divorced from their material situations, and because even the quasi-agentic actions of nonsubjective entities cannot be wholly predicted, we also undermine the project of mastery crystalized in the totalizing terms of a God’s Eye View. Whilst the failure of the naturalist’s

transcendental project of purification does mean that the more-than-human world cannot be wholly possessed or controlled, I contend that this should give us no cause for regret as environmental philosophers. Rather, it should serve to motivate adherence to more positive onto-epistemological norm in the form of the view-from-everywhere, which may better facilitate a reduction in violence through the richer range of meanings it admits. Whilst one might nevertheless have some worries about the possibility of establishing the requisite shift in praxis to affect the reduction in violence mentioned above, however, I argued that the indeterminacy of perceptual habits offers reason for optimism about the prospects for an ecophenomenology under which we may *better* perceive and relate to the more-than-human world as a matter of praxis.

Chapter 5: The Spectre of Correlationism

Over the preceding chapters, I've explored some ways in which adopting a radically-reflective ecophenomenological praxis might help us begin to disrupt some of the problematic (meta-)theoretical assumptions and commitments which constitute the 'submerged mass' of our crisis situation. Ecophenomenology, I've argued, is amenable to addressing more-than-human entities on their own, rich terms and is particularly well-suited to foster critical self-reflexivity about our habitual tendencies to overwrite more-than-human alterity. It's important to adopt a specifically *ecophenomenological* praxis, I've suggested, if we're to address the dualistic and objectivistic prejudices which imbue our default naturalism. If, as I've argued, these prejudices are key motors of the colonial attitudes which licence our continued exploitation of the more-than-human world, then addressing and problematizing their residual sediment is an important part of addressing the environmental crisis. Thus—and, to reiterate, this is the main positive claim of my thesis—taking up the sort of praxis I promote surely has a key role to play in addressing the violence of our environmental crisis.

Over the remaining chapters, I shall explore some important challenges to the claims I've been advancing. In doing so, I also intend to 'flesh out' and further support the praxis I defend. Each of these challenges is intimately related to the 'correlationist' charge we met in the introduction, and so it is there that we shall begin. Proponents of this charge hold that, because phenomenology is limited to concerns about how the world appears *for* a particular sort of human subject, it is necessarily incompatible with the goals I have in mind. Since phenomenology precludes access to the modality of the in-itself, they claim, it is incompatible with addressing nonhuman Others in *their* alterity. According to the speculative realists who level the charge, phenomenology maintains a fundamentally introverted focus which destines it to reveal nonhuman entities in a manner non-accidentally related to their place in an anthropocentric schema. Thus, they claim, phenomenology is bound to perpetuate the colonial violence that I employ it to curtail.

In this chapter, I respond to the correlationist charge against Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology via an argument with two steps. I firstly argue that if Merleau-Pontian phenomenologists court *something like* correlationism, this is because of a well-justified desire to retain the genuine alterity of other parties revealed in experience, serious engagement with which is better accommodated within *something like* correlationist philosophy. I then problematize the claim that Merleau-Pontian phenomenology is necessarily correlationist, at least in any problematic sense. On my account, any serious version of the correlationist charge is misdirected because Merleau-Pontians deny the ontological primacy of the poles between

which correlational ‘access’ is said to occur. Ultimately, I hope to show that, by reinstating the centrality of the body to phenomenological investigation and, thus, licencing a *chiasmic* relationship between body-subject and world, a *radically-reflective* ecophenomenology can nullify the problems supposedly introduced by correlationism even if, at some level of description, *something like* the charge may be true. Thus, I aim to show, there is no in-principle incompatibility between Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology and the goals I set for it based on the correlationist charge.

5.1 Correlationism

Speculative realism is a diverse movement, widely recognised to be united only by its formal rejection of correlationism and the desire to overcome it in one way or another (Sparrow, 2014, p.115; Shaviro, 2014, p.65)⁶¹. So, what is correlationism?

In a statement more-or-less echoed by all speculative realists, Quentin Meillassoux holds that “by ‘correlation’ we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (Meillassoux, 2008, p.5). Since the correlation is “unsurpassable... Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another” (2008, p.5). Phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty resist cleaving epistemology from ontology because one’s phenomenological opening is the only means of establishing any such ontology. However, as Merleau-Ponty argues, any phenomenology worth its salt recognises that the phenomenological body-subject actively structures the entire “concrete physiognomy” (*PP*, p.57) of its experience. Phenomenology seems, therefore, only to be able to make sense of the world as an intentional correlate *for* that body-subject, and thus, Meillassoux claims, phenomenologists have *no* means of access to any stipulative world outside of the correlative schema⁶².

⁶¹ Like Graham Harman, I understand object-oriented ontology to be a species of the genus ‘speculative realism’. Although some (e.g. Sparrow, 2014) conscribe new materialists like Bennett to the speculative realist cause, it is misleading to do so. Whilst evidently a metaphysical realist, Bennett, for example, isn’t committed to evading correlationism via speculation, nor does she necessarily concede the prevalent existence of correlationism at all. Since this chapter’s main aim is to defend ecophenomenology against the correlationist charge, I won’t explicate the various speculative realist positions in any detail. I dwell a little longer on object-oriented ontology, since it alone grants any real concession to nonhuman alterity.

⁶² Since Merleau-Pontian phenomenology adheres to an expressive theory of truth, under which an entirely independent thing-in-itself cannot be grasped, Merleau-Pontians apparently find themselves in a worse position (‘strong correlationism’) than Kantians (‘weak correlationism’). Kant at least thinks that the thing-in-itself can be thought, and must exist, even if it cannot be *known* without anthropocentric filtering via the categories (Meillassoux, 2008, p.35).

There are several strands to the criticism that, in this manner, correlationism (and therefore phenomenology) *licences* the sort of violence (e.g. technoscientific instrumentalism, large-scale environmental degradation, or exclusionary anthropocentric politics) I've been employing phenomenological tools to evade. I shall explore three of these in turn.

(a) The Subjectivism Problem

If the bounds of the correlation are unbreachable, then “[n]othing that is in the correlation can be used to adjudicate differing claims about what is outside the correlation” (Richmond, 2015, p.400). Thus, for Meillassoux at least, by rejecting the ‘absolutism’ of the thing-in-itself, “correlational reason thereby legitimates *all* those discourses that claim access to an absolute, *the only proviso being that nothing in these discourses resembles a rational justification of their validity*” (Meillassoux, 2008, pp.44-5). Since correlationism effectively reduces the scope of philosophical argumentation to fideistic belief, correlationism apparently results in a radical subjectivism, implicitly stacked in favour of the (human) subject, regarding how one should perceive, understand, and treat (nonhuman) objects. To clarify: this isn't because any belief about a given entity can be put to a subjective court of appeal which somehow reasons to its ultimate justification, but because the fideism that allegedly results from correlationism “legitimizes de jure every variety whatsoever of belief in an absolute, the best as well as the worst” (Meillassoux, 2008, p.46). Thus, although the correlationist affirms the fundamental (anthropocentric) asymmetry of the epistemic relationship between subject and object, under correlationism, any belief that a (human) subject might have about a (nonhuman) object appears to be rendered equally legitimate simply in virtue of its being believed.

(b) The Intersubjectivity Problem

Of course, the above is only part of the story. Correlationists have means *within* the correlation with which to adjudicate truth claims, but only through the sort of intersubjective consensus employed by Kant, Husserl, and Haraway⁶³. One putative problem with such appeals is that, since the intersubjective community is effectively exclusively human, consensus entrenches a

⁶³ Haraway seemingly shows her correlationist stripes when she insists that objectivity must be understood in terms of overlapping (human) consensus, or “webs of connections”, which allow “solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (1991, p.191). Like Haraway, Husserl (1960, pp.106-7) contends that the world's “objectivity” may also be co-constituted by trans-species Others. Nevertheless, Meillassoux holds that, under correlationism, any nonhuman ‘intersubjective’ contributions can only be grasped by subsuming them under the narrowly anthropocentric terms of the correlationist circle. This is because, Meillassoux claims, transcendental subjectivity is confined to a “transparent cage”: the specific, incarnated, “*point of view*” in which a subject is “*instantiated*” and which dictates the terms of critical enquiry (2008, p.7; pp.24-5). Although we should have misgivings about Meillassoux's argument, we shall see in the next chapter that Husserl's ‘transcendental conditions of experience’ aren't obviously hospitable to the alterity of nonhuman body-subjects.

“species solipsism” (Meillassoux, 2008, p.50) whereby species norms usurp the primacy of any reality beyond that community. Similar, if not worse effects are therefore licenced, since species solipsism mistakes the human perspective for reality. Thus, we might plausibly expect anthropocentric instrumentalism to follow from correlationism in a similar manner to the one that concerned Heidegger about technology (i.e. by Enframing nonhuman entities in terms of their use-value-for-us, albeit through a disinterested façade).

(c) The Problem of Human Exceptionalism

Timothy Morton calls correlationism “anthropocentrism in philosophical form” (2011, p.164) for some of the above reasons, but he also contends that the correlationist focus on acts of meaning constitution turns us away from concern for the world itself by imposing a mistaken human exceptionalism. This problem has two dimensions. In the first place, if objects exist *only for subjects*, and subjects are effectively ubiquitously human, then philosophy is drawn away from *concern* for ‘the real world’ and towards *description* of ‘my world’. This would prove disastrous in terms of a reduced push to address other entities on their own terms; terms which, speculative realists claim, cannot be “[p]recisely the terms concomitant with the first-person phenomenological point of view” (Brassier, 2007, p.27). This allegedly anthropocentric shift also seems to speak against taking up the toil of environmental engagement since, as Simon James puts it, “[t]o think that mountain streams, humpback whales, and Californian redwoods need our care and attention, one must presumably see these things... as enjoying some kind of existence in their own right” (2007, p.502)⁶⁴.

The second dimension of anthropocentric exceptionalism concerns turning away from the *real* things themselves; a move that apparently belies the mistaken ontological bifurcation of human subjects and (entities in) nature. Here, the sort of subject/object cleavage imposed by correlationism allegedly contains, or at least facilitates, a *dualistic* hierarchy of kind, value, and the like. For Morton, this is largely because correlationism cleaves *human* subjects—who retain a constitutive monopoly on epistemological and ontological matters—from *natural* objects, which are plastic insofar as they are unable to resist being violently subsumed under

⁶⁴ James associates these arguments for metaphysical realism with Holmes Rolston III. Rolston anticipates Meillassoux’s ‘ancestrality’ argument by referring to the “lion-objects” that must temporally precede one’s identification of them as such (1997, pp.52-5). Meillassoux contends that phenomenology relies on a world that precedes human consciousness in order for it to emerge. However, because of its correlationism, Meillassoux thinks, phenomenology cannot even think about the world it requires. Engaging fully with the ancestrality argument goes beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I gesture in the direction of a response via Merleau-Ponty’s identification of ‘lateral kinship’ in section 5.3.

the interested correlational terms of human subjects. Thus, correlationism cannot obviously decentre the human perspective in the manner necessary for serious environmental concern⁶⁵.

In these ways, philosophy since the “Kantian catastrophe” appears to have been hopelessly and dangerously introverted because, even in acts of radical reflection, philosophy cannot escape the “correlationist circle” (Meillassoux, 2008, p.5; p.124). In this circle, entities cannot be addressed on their own terms without the caveat ‘for us’. For phenomenologists, the ‘for us’ is explicitly tied to one’s (human) intentional horizon. Thus, the argument goes, because of its paradigmatic commitment to correlationism, phenomenology is incompatible with nonanthropocentric epistemic engagement with the more-than-human world. Regardless of any formal commitment to a radically-reflective view-from-everywhere, then, ecophenomenology appears to be unavoidably implicated in the imposition of colonial violence that I employ it to disrupt.

5.2 Why Regard for Alterity Requires *Something Like* Correlationism

To respond to these charges, I will first discuss how the requirement not to overwrite nonhuman alterity, which infuses all three objections, may speak in favour of adopting *something like* a correlationist philosophy.

One plausible place to begin on this is Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the Other. As a matter of inescapable “perceptual faith”, one recognises that, as an *alter ego*, the other party opens onto a common world, which may nevertheless differ by significant degree from one’s own (VI, p18; p.141). There can, however, be no possibility of their perspective presenting itself to me without collapsing that alterity. If the Other were “given to me such as he is present to himself... the fusion of its ego with mine would cause its alterity to disappear” (Barbaras, 2004, p.128). Others are given to us fundamentally ambiguously: neither as pure positivity (object), nor—given the commonality of our world—are they given as a pure lack (subject)⁶⁶.

⁶⁵ Morton claims that resisting “Western ideas of the subject as transcendence” requires re-construing “everything as objects”, and recognising that “[t]here is no Nature, only people, some of whom are human beings” (2008, p.77; 2011, p.168). Although Morton’s solution to this problem differs radically from Meillassoux’s, his basic objection is consistent with Meillassoux’s lament that, through specifically *correlational* subject/object relations, “contemporary philosophers have lost the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of precritical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere” (Meillassoux, 2008, p.7).

⁶⁶ Note the similarities with Merleau-Ponty’s earlier discussion of the meanings available to beetles and dogs. In the human case, however, we register a greater degree of access to the world inhabited by the body-subject in question.

If we cannot subsume the Other into ourselves by reducing them to an object, then we should presumably be attentive to the limits of our own worlds and any ‘objects’ therein. We’ve seen that addressing the Other in her alterity in a manner that evades an erroneous ontological and epistemological imperialism requires that one first recognises that ‘how the world is for me’ cannot be unproblematically universalized. One crucial limitation on doing so comes through acknowledging that, even as theorists, we’re always both situated and irreducibly embodied.

A recap might be useful here. Merleau-Ponty argues that epistemological and ontological claims always rely on the primacy of first-person perspective, in the context of which they (via the natural sciences and so on) derive their usefulness and truth-value. Merleau-Ponty contends that one’s embodiment contributes the most important co-determinant of the way that the world is presented, since our expectations of reality are tied to our bodily capacities as our medium of having a world in the first place. “A thing”, Merleau-Ponty argues, is “not actually given in perception, it is internally taken up by us, reconstituted and experienced by us in so far as it is bound up with a world, the basic structures of which we carry with us” (*PP*, p.326). One’s primordial relationship with(in) the world is, therefore, *operatively intentional*; one’s embodied expectations co-determine the world’s meanings via one’s grip on it. Merleau-Ponty also argues, however, that perception is always subject to habitual sediment via the intentional arc. Here ‘knowledge’ is sedimented into habits which normatively influence the body schema at the pre-reflective level. What all of this tells towards is that reality is always expressed from within a situation which one cannot plausibly transcend because, even if one were (somehow) able to bracket all historico-cultural sediment and return to a pre-sedimentary situation, this would still be undertaken *as* a concrete human body, the grounding perceptual norms of which won’t straightforwardly map onto all biotic entities, let alone allow one to exhaustively express the perceiver-independent reality of any putative abiota-in-itself.

I repeat these details to emphasize that recognition of one’s contribution to the pre-thematic reality which underwrites our ontological and epistemological claims is given central prominence in Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. One implication of doing so is that philosophy, for Merleau-Ponty, is properly characterized *as* radical reflection: the perpetual process of attempting to slacken one’s intentional threads to better appreciate the basic intentional structures that one co-constructs with the world. But, as we’ve seen, Merleau-Ponty is also expressly concerned with the *chiasmic* encroachments that radical reflection might reveal with other epistemic body-subjects and, consequently, the overlaps *and* inexhaustible differences in the meaningful ways that the world might be expressed. If one’s differential embodiment is as epistemologically pivotal as Merleau-Ponty claims, then it

stands to reason that one task for radical reflection *must* be to maintain an interrogative focus on uncovering where one might (implicitly) overwrite the alterity of other entities via the imposition of situated (and sedimented) ways of perceiving as universal truth. In doing so, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology may take entirely seriously the thought that expressive truth rules out the plausibility of exhaustive accounts of (particular aspects of) reality by taking to heart Levinas' thought that objectification involves subsuming all truths into mine; it is "*the reduction of the other to the same*" (Levinas, 1987a, p.48). Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is, after all, principally defined by its hostility to the sort of totalizing ontological and epistemological objectification that Levinas criticizes⁶⁷. This enables Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists to set out their *nonanthropocentric* stall.

Now, given that "man [sic] is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (PP, pp.x–xi), there can be no *coincidental* return to 'the things themselves' in Brassier's sense. This *seems* to make Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology correlationist. What I want to argue here is that if *something like* correlationism is the price to pay for an intrinsic focus on perpetually addressing one's own imposition of ontological and epistemological violence, then perhaps Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists should cheerfully accept the charge (or something like it).

But this may be too quick. Speculative realists argue that *they* are suitably reflexive about such violence, whilst also maintaining the metaphysical realism apparently essential to avoid disastrous environmental implications. After all, no speculative realist asserts that one has unfettered access to reality-in-itself. Rather, they claim, reality can be (speculatively) known *in part*. It seems, however, that the brand of realism they employ ultimately speaks against their capacity to maintain sufficient reflexivity.

5.2.1 Correlationism and the Realism/Idealism Binary

One underlying problem derives from speculative realists mistaking phenomenological 'correlationism' for an (anthropocentric) absolutizing of the subject pole and, therefore,

⁶⁷ To clarify: Levinas (1993 pp.96-103) holds that, by understanding Others in epistemological terms, Merleau-Ponty misses the ethical moment of radical alterity. For Levinas, ethical engagement with alterity requires a "nonreciprocal relationship" (1987b, p.83) between parties. Levinas' critique, however, misses the mark on two counts. Levinas firstly fails to appreciate that, for Merleau-Ponty, as body-subjects who share chiasmic openings onto the world, identity and alterity become largely matters of degree rather than kind. It's straightforwardly false, therefore, to think that a partial epistemic reciprocity entails, or even seeks, a relationship of objectivistic assimilation in the manner Levinas thinks. Secondly, as Jack Reynolds (2004, pp.315-7) argues, Levinas also fails to appreciate that one can elicit from Merleau-Ponty's works a certain *ethical* salience to the possibility of dialogical reciprocity between parties that can only really be facilitated by a degree of epistemic encroachment. This will prove important in what follows.

something to be avoided at all costs. In the speculative realist literature (e.g. Meillassoux, 2008, p.18; Sparrow, 2014, p.26), a binarism is often set up between idealism and realism whereby denying *epistemic* access to the in-itself is considered enough to commit one to a full-blown *metaphysical* idealism. Although I cannot discuss it in depth here, this claim is misleading, even when levelled at the arch-correlationist: Kant⁶⁸. To his credit, however, Harman attempts to address this conflation of epistemology with metaphysics head-on, so we will evaluate his argument more fully.

Harman argues that correlationists are committed to a *de facto* metaphysical idealism because correlationism precludes access to the world-in-itself and, thus, entails that the world is *treated* in an idealistic manner by the correlationist. That is, under correlationism one absolutizes the subject pole as a matter of *praxis* and so correlationism legitimates the violent behaviours mentioned above. If one has no epistemic access to the glacier in-itself, the argument goes, the glacier is effectively reduced to the ways it appears to perspectives *like mine*. Harman therefore proposes a “litmus test” for correlationism: “Of any philosophy we encounter, it can be asked whether it has anything to tell us about the impact of inanimate objects upon one another, apart from any human awareness of this fact” (2005, p.42). Answering ‘no’ to this question, Harman thinks, “condemn[s] philosophy to operate only as a reflexive meta-critique of the conditions of knowledge” (2005, p.42).

We should have reservations about much of Harman’s argument, but I want to focus on one response available to the ecophenomenologist. It might be claimed that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology can *pass* Harman’s litmus test and, thus, escape the *de facto* idealism levelled against it. It may do so because, as we saw over the preceding chapters, Merleau-Ponty thinks that we only *perceive* whole objects (marbles, film sets, rainforests, and so on) because perspectives *licenced by other entities themselves* form constitutive parts of one’s perception. Thus, one might plausibly claim, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology *does* have *something* to tell us about inter-objective relations without reducing them *to* one’s own awareness of those relations in the manner necessary to implicate one in idealism.

To clarify: accepting the partiality of situated perspective is the starting point of object-oriented ontology. Harman cannot, therefore, think that the mere fact that one’s knowledge of inter-objective encounters is always gleaned from a situated perspective is enough to render a

⁶⁸ David Golumbia (2016, p.17) emphasizes Kant’s own rejection of idealism in his discussion of the compatibility of Kantian metaphysics and realist Newtonian science, for instance. Nonetheless, I think Harman is more-or-less right that “the thing portrayed by the natural sciences is the thing made dependent on our knowledge, and not the thing in its untamed, subterranean reality” (2011b, p.80). Harman and I differ, however, on whether natural science (properly situated) is idealistic.

philosophy idealist without undermining the realism of his own project. Neither can Harman claim that idealism is entailed by the mere fallibility of knowledge claims made about inter-objective relationships. Like Meillassoux, Harman admits the fallibility of speculative knowledge claims. In terms of other entities, there needs to be a stronger epistemic ‘reduction to’, or *metaphysical* ‘dependence on’, human awareness to entail Harman’s *de facto* idealism. But Merleau-Ponty doesn’t invoke either of these.

Nevertheless, Harman cites the passage in question as an example of Merleau-Ponty’s idealism, calling it “a metaphysics of relations” (2005, p.50). Harman argues that if something is reduced to a view-from-everywhere which leaves “nothing hidden” (as Merleau-Ponty claims), then Merleau-Ponty *is* effectively advancing an idealist metaphysics (Harman, 2005, p.51; *PP*, p.79). This is because, Harman contends, the entities in question *are* ultimately nothing more than the multiple human perspectives in which they feature. After all, Merleau-Ponty doesn’t (and shouldn’t) engage in the sort of panpsychist or animist anthropomorphism under which glaciers or rocks really perceive one another in the absence of intentional body-subjects⁶⁹. A metaphysics of relations, for Harman, is tantamount to idealism and is purportedly exemplified by Merleau-Ponty’s consistent reduction of the in-itself to an “*in-itself-for-us*” (*PP*, p.375). Harman goes so far as to accuse Merleau-Ponty of a pseudo-Kantian intellectualism under which reality is “a vast homogenous totality until humans burst onto the scene” (2005, p.52)⁷⁰. If Harman’s critique holds, then Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology does seem to absolutize the human subject in a suspiciously anthropocentric manner.

However, Harman misunderstands what Merleau-Ponty means by the ‘in-itself-for-us’⁷¹. For Merleau-Ponty, remember, the *inexhaustible* contribution of the world with(in) which one communicates is an essential co-determinant of reality that is irreducible to Harman’s idealistic characterization. Although the world shows up only in particular expressions as integrated, diacritically-interrelated wholes, Merleau-Ponty is adamant that the world retains what James calls a “brute presence” that is irreducible to acts of perception, which is the very reason why our intersubjective world is unavoidably *common* in the first place (James, 2007, p.507; *PP*, pp.320-4). Thus, although the view-from-everywhere provides normative onto-

⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty insists that there is no requirement for universal sentience, even within the context of the flesh ontology (see VI, p.39; p.136; p.250).

⁷⁰ Harman might also be picking up on the resonances (which Merleau-Ponty sometimes courts) with the pure plenitude of Sartrean being-in-itself. I explain why Merleau-Ponty isn’t necessarily committed to a problematic Sartrean ontology in chapter seven.

⁷¹ We should emphasize Merleau-Ponty’s warning about linguistic distortion present in the terminology he employs. For Merleau-Ponty, an entity “is not first of all a meaning for the understanding, but a structure accessible to inspection by the body, and if we try to describe the real as it appears to us in perceptual experience, we find it overlaid with anthropological predicates” (*PP*, p.320).

epistemological guidance, entities aren't thereby *reduced* to the sum of all 'subjective' perspectives, because they co-express themselves *in* or *through* those perspectives. I might not be able to make sense of a pre-expressive autonomous reality, but reality doesn't thereby become *mine* in any accurate sense. There is, as we've seen, a meaningful distinction to be made whereby 'I cannot say that *I* see the blue of the sky in the same sense in which I say that I understand a book or again in which I decide to devote my life to mathematics'⁷². One cannot communicate alone.

However, Harman or Meillassoux might respond that this still doesn't satisfy the more fundamental objection that phenomenology remains idealistic insofar as it is incompatible with epistemic access to objects, or properties *in-themselves*. Meillassoux would contend that, since Merleau-Ponty concedes that the view-from-everywhere can be only a "presumptive synthesis" (*PP*, p.90) on the part of the body-subject, rather than being straightforwardly ontologically manifest, Merleau-Pontian phenomenologists remain unable to say anything about the perceiver-independent absolute. Other promising examples cited by Kelly, such as when "the lighting directs my gaze and causes me to see the object, so that in a sense it *knows* and *sees* the object", fare little better on this score because, for all its extra-human normative impetus, if the "view from nowhere... is a contradiction", then 'the object' can never be understood entirely independently of the gaze in which it manifests itself (*PP*, p.67; p.310).

Whilst these contentions about phenomenology's inability to access epistemically-purified things-in-themselves are true as far as they go, they serve to highlight the fundamental problem with the charge of idealism: speculative realists take the subject/object cleavage to be ontologically primitive in a manner denied by Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists⁷³. Thus, where one cannot engage with reality-in-itself (i.e. 'objective' reality), one is apparently committed to a 'subjective' prison, under which reality is subsumed into what is narrowly one's *own* (anthropocentric) perspective. But carnal phenomenologies which employ a doctrine of expressive truth simply don't conform to this rigid subject/object schema (with its dualistic trappings) other than as a reflective abstraction. Moreover, the main reason Merleau-Ponty cautions against objective thought in the first place is that, by reifying a purified realm of objects, we lose sight of our important contributions to their basic intentional physiognomy. I've suggested that it is these very contributions that radical reflection must interrogate if we're

⁷² These sorts of claim hold true, even though Bennett provides reason to tread cautiously when making them.

⁷³ Shaviro explicitly blames correlationism on the bifurcation of nature into distinct objective and subjective realms (2014, p.65). However, as we shall see, by collapsing subject/object distinctions *in the modality of the in-itself*, Shaviro is no less guilty than his speculative colleagues of this very bifurcation.

to *resist* the erroneous, and potentially dangerous, imposition of ontological and epistemological terms.

In fact, the acquired subject/object schema that underpins speculative realist analyses plausibly derives from the primary ambiguity experienced by body-subjects; an ambiguity necessitated by taking one's embedded implication in perspectival Gestalts seriously. But this ambiguity doesn't make the 'subject' the sole motor of truth, and this is where the charge of idealism breaks down⁷⁴. Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists can, and do, take the contributions of other entities seriously on their own terms. On my account at least, they simply recognise that doing so *also* requires radical critical self-reflexivity to the limitations of one's situated perspective and the contributions that one's sedimented history make to it. Nonetheless, the important fact remains that, whilst (as Morton claims) narrowly *self*-reflexive critique retains a crucial role in Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, it cannot be *the* task of philosophy because its focus is too narrow. It would recognise only one stand of radical reflection (critique), at the cost of the other (openness to the world).

If my arguments hold, then Merleau-Pontian phenomenology needn't be guilty of the idealism with which it is charged and which (along with the failure of dogmatic metaphysicians to recognise their own anthropocentric heritage) provides the impetus for a speculative realist turn. If I'm right about this, then speculative realists also appear to be misled about the (anthropocentric) limitations of phenomenology's scope. What the analyses contained in the preceding sections do, however, is allow us to foreground the implicit principles on which speculative realism is built and which will ultimately speak against *its* ability to address more-than-human entities in their alterity.

5.2.2 Tensions Between Anticorrelationist Realism and Alterity

In addressing the modality of the in-itself, speculative realism's focus subtly, but importantly, shifts away from addressing one's own limitations and commitments, and towards stipulative transcendent means of access which nullify one's subjective contribution. Even putting aside Merleau-Ponty's arguments for the implausibility of doing so, this shift of focus turns one's reflective attention *away* from the -centric overwriting of alterity; one of the very issues that was to be addressed by speculative realism. Steven Shaviro, for example, blames Kant's anthropocentrism on his critical self-reflexivity which, Shaviro contends, should be "dislodged" because it is 'too inward-looking' (2014, p.72). What tends to happen, instead, is

⁷⁴ There are clear parallels between the false dilemmas of empiricism/intellectualism and realism/idealism. The claim that correlationism boils down to subjective mediation of objects appears to attribute a misleading sort of representationalism in Merleau-Ponty's case.

that speculative realism is drawn towards reflective abstractions. Abstracting in this manner is problematic, as we've already seen, for at least two reasons: because the further one abstracts from grounding perceptual expressions, the risk of reflective distortion increases; and because such abstractions are *more* prone to conceal the contribution of the situated body-subject. Here are a few examples from the speculative realist literature to illustrate.

To avoid relying on a phenomenological opening, both Meillassoux and Brassier reduce the in-itself to inert matter. They each do so because they think that disrupting the correlationist circle requires teasing apart subject/thought from object/being. By purifying the in-itself from any necessary reliance on (human) thought or subjectivity, they hope to speculatively access metaphysically real things-in-themselves on their own terms. For Meillassoux, radically decentring thought requires resuscitating a neo-Cartesian account of primary qualities under which only "*those aspects of the object that can be formulated in mathematical terms can be meaningfully conceived as properties of the object in itself*" (2008, p.3; p.115). For Brassier, a significant "gain in intelligibility" comes through the realisation that being-in-itself is characterized by "the extinction of meaning... the cancellation of sense, purpose and possibility" (2007, p.238).

As Plumwood has argued, however, these sorts of schematization belie a familiar truncated reversal of the Cartesian schema: a misleading anthropocentric metaphysics—minus the mind—under which nonhuman 'objects' are implicitly instrumentalized. By leaving the dogmatic terms of the subject/object dualism unchallenged, these truncated reversals retain the hierarchical assumption that 'objects' differ in kind from (human) 'subjects' in a manner that effectively legitimates viewing the former as a resource. Simply jettisoning the subject pole, as Meillassoux and Brassier do, therefore, won't disrupt the residual political agenda since—largely because of certain sedimented metatheoretical assumptions—only an impoverished conception of the world is left behind (Plumwood, 1993, p.47).

But Meillassoux's problems don't end there because his 'reversal' of the Cartesian schema isn't even consistently 'truncated'. Meillassoux's problematic human exceptionalism is perhaps best seen in his account of the "brute emergence" of subjectivity with humanity; a claim that would make human thought radically discontinuous with the rest of the world (see Harman, 2011a, p.59; Shaviro, 2014, p.75). Nevertheless, in the final analysis, Brassier fares little better. Brassier's exceptionalism comes with the nihilism he consistently equates with the absence of *human* valuers. Both dualistically cleave mind/culture/subject from body/nature/object along anthropocentric lines that should trouble Morton as much as Plumwood.

Shaviro attempts to address these issues by rehabilitating a “paradoxical”, Whiteheadian mode of reflective speculation, which, he claims, is our only means of encountering “the world without us obliquely” (2014, pp.66-7). However, in doing so, Shaviro curtails the subject/object bifurcation too forcefully and *collapses* the distinction into a panpsychism at the level of the in-itself, thereby subsuming nonhuman entities under human categories; most notably *universal* sentience. Although we’ve seen Merleau-Ponty argue that intentionality extends well into the biotic community—at least as far as dung beetles, but probably much further—this only problematizes the body/mind binary. Significantly, it means that, contrary to Harman’s (2005, p.173) assertion, Merleau-Pontian Others don’t have to be human⁷⁵. However, especially if one is to take seriously the possible *heterogeneity* of mindedness and its intrinsic relationship to our concrete modes of embodiment, Merleau-Ponty’s admission certainly doesn’t entail Shaviro’s contention that “intentionality is... an ontological feature of objects in general” (Harman, cited in Shaviro, 2014, p.80)⁷⁶.

To clarify: whilst I applaud Shaviro’s rejection of Meillassoux’s assumption that “thought, value, and experience are essentially, or exclusively human to begin with” (2014, p.91), this realisation hasn’t led Shaviro to problematize the Cartesian sediment that underpins Meillassoux’s account. Shaviro ultimately admits nonhuman entities to the sphere of mindedness, not by disrupting the atomistic and hierarchical terms of the subject/object dualism, but by anthropomorphically extending them without reserve. This has the effect that, to the extent that Shaviro may address nonhuman Others, their subjectivity cannot differ from his in any radical manner. Shaviro says as much when he claims that “[t]he bat’s inner experience is inaccessible to me, but this is so in much the same way... that any other person’s inner experience is accessible to me” (2014, p.92). By making *all* entities “autonomous centers” (2014, p.89) of life, in possession of remarkably humanoid subjectivities, it seems that Shaviro is guilty of what Plumwood calls ‘incorporation’: the colonial act of defining the

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty makes this point repeatedly in the *Structure of Behaviour*. In its final paragraph, as we saw in chapter two, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is an objectivistic error to attempt to transcendently naturalize a nonhuman Gestalt. This explains why the *Phenomenology* is so concerned with human perception—it is a phenomenological investigation carried out *within* a certain kind of Gestalt structure—not because he abandoned nonhuman intentionality. Harman doesn’t seem to be familiar with Merleau-Ponty’s early work. Acceptance of nonhuman ‘awareness’, however, might allow Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology to pass Harman’s litmus test in another way because it licences irreducibly nonhuman expressions of the world.

⁷⁶ Recall Bennett’s distinction between subjective mentality and quasi-agency. Since Shaviro is set against ‘brute emergence’, he needs even slime moulds, thermostats, and neutrinos to possess the former. Quasi-agency, however, isn’t so obviously neo-Cartesian.

underside in a manner relative to the master identity—in this case, roughly, a Cartesian subject—rather than emancipating it in *its* alterity⁷⁷.

The ‘object-oriented ontology’ strand of speculative realism is tainted by similar problems. Object-oriented ontologists make an important admission to alterity in recognising that, as one situated entity amongst others, one cannot exhaust the reality of the in-itself. Object-oriented ontologists hold that differential objects-in-themselves (e.g. human beings, pins, rainforests, axolotls, or neutrinos) “enter into relations”, yet “their allies cannot mine their ores” because the objects *themselves* remain hidden as they ‘withdraw’ (Harman, 2009, p.132). Inter-objective communication is effected by decoupled properties which “metaphorize” one another, “distorting [other objects], caricaturing them, bringing them into play only partially” (Harman, 2005, p.172). Following Harman, Ian Bogost explains that metaphorism captures “some aspects of something else at the cost of other aspects”, and that this process is based on the “internal properties” of the object doing the caricaturing (2012, p.66).

The problems here are twofold. Firstly, alterity *is* retained via object withdrawal, but only in something akin to Levinas’ sense of a ‘nonreciprocal relationship’ in which the withdrawing Other stands impenetrably apart⁷⁸. Like Harman (2005, p.103), Levinas thinks that where the Other is made present to consciousness she is, at best, considered as an *alter ego* derivative from oneself. *Absolute* alterity, Levinas claims, is therefore precluded by phenomenologies of the Merleau-Pontian ilk. In a similar vein, object-oriented ontologists charge ecophenomenology with correlationism (and subsequently idealism), because ecophenomenology allegedly subsumes more-than-human entities (e.g. glaciers, redwoods, or neutrinos) into a particular (anthropocentric) intentional horizon⁷⁹. Object-oriented ontologists appear to be tied to something like an *absolute* conception of alterity because their analyses depend on the binary yes/no question of whether the *object-in-itself* is made entirely manifest

⁷⁷ For Plumwood, remember, the master identity is also socio-historically constructed. The atomism invoked from the master perspective, for example, is fallacious outside of the logic of dualism. This means that acts of incorporation, like Shaviro’s, are shot through with misleading and unacknowledged sediment. There are more explicitly androcentric overtones in Shaviro’s Baconian claim that “scientific experimentation... forces [the world] to speak” (2014, p.71).

⁷⁸ Since object-oriented ontologists think that all objects intend orprehend one another in much the same ways it is appropriate, if uncomfortably anthropomorphic, to refer to all objects as Others here.

⁷⁹ The difference between the two positions is that Levinas never explicitly claims that we’re unable to know Others due to some epistemic limitation of access. His point is that all knowing totalizes and our ethical responsibility to Others is an altogether different manner of relating. Nevertheless, to fully understand Levinas’ objection to Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, he (like Harman) must think that one cannot gain even a degree of epistemic access to the Other without collapsing their alterity in a colonial manner. Likewise, object-oriented ontology isn’t merely concerned with epistemological or ontological matters. As Morton’s work makes particularly clear, object-oriented ontologists diagnose a certain ethical salience to the attempt to address nonhuman Others on their own terms. The two positions are much closer than one might think.

to another situated object. Since all inter-objective encounters allegedly take place in the modality of the in-itself and yet may differ significantly—rainwater, for instance, can wash away spilt vinegar, yet never *itself* interacts with the vinegar’s pungent taste—object-oriented ontologists require objects to retain an excess which isn’t exhausted in any inter-objective encounter⁸⁰. Thus, what is encountered, object-oriented ontologists hold, cannot ever be the object itself.

Merleau-Ponty, however, would think that this sort of absolute, impenetrable conception of alterity *precludes* serious engagement with other entities. By ‘fetishizing’ alterity in this absolutist manner, Jack Reynolds (2004, p.317) argues, one denies the possibility of even partial epistemic encroachment. In doing so, one solipsistically hyperseparates parties and the ground for *engagement* on their own terms becomes impossible⁸¹. But the problem runs deeper than this. Like Beauvoir, Heinämaa (1999, pp.125-6) thinks that the concept of absolute alterity has unwelcome political reverberations because it is the assumption of this kind of alterity that licences the self/other *dualism* and the violence subsequently legitimated towards those marked as ‘other’. In short: whilst the deployment of absolute alterity may be beneficial for limiting anthropocentric hubris, it doesn’t really allow one to address nonhuman Others at all. Object withdrawal, therefore, does little to promote engagement with more-than-human entities *in* their alterity, which was the primary requirement of the issues we surveyed in section 5.1⁸².

Genuine engagement with more-than-human entities seems, instead, to require striking the right balance between addressing their “openness” to us and maintaining attention to the legitimacy of their “occultation” (VI, p.28). Doing justice to alterity here requires two things: firstly, that more-than-human entities should be addressed on their own terms, which are irreducible to one’s own; secondly, recognising that, *as other*, other entities will never deliver their truths to me in an exhaustive manner. Both requirements are compatible with the doctrine of expressive truth that is central to Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology. This is because, for Merleau-Ponty, an entity is only ever *partly* present to a given body-subject via its brute contribution to a given expression.

⁸⁰ This argument can, at most, function on an epistemological level. The rainwater is oblivious to the pungency of the vinegar, but it nevertheless (ontologically) dilutes it. The sort of intentional encounter object-oriented ontologists describe cannot, therefore, be “in any sense definitive” (Shaviro, 2014, pp.105-6) of encounters more broadly.

⁸¹ Somewhat ironically, Harman (2005, pp.41-2) levels this criticism against Levinas.

⁸² If the object-oriented ontologists’ claim isn’t that the object stands apart, but itself somehow *motivates* asymmetrical metaphor, we’re left with something—problematic atomistic ontology aside—that differs little from Merleau-Pontian ‘correlationism’.

The second problem with the object-oriented account is that alterity *isn't* given sufficient due with respect to the metaphorizing relations between objects. By the object-oriented ontologists' own lights, they must either accept that one cannot speak meaningfully of *nonhuman* inter-objective communications because one always metaphorizes Others (so I metaphorize (i.e. anthropomorphize) relationships between rainwater and vinegar, or between orangutan and rainforest), or else one must somehow transcend one's situation to describe such communication accurately. Attempts to do the latter are inevitably couched in markedly human terms, either via reductive scientific terms (usually about quanta) which are presented, bizarrely, as if universal (e.g. Morton, 2011; Bogost, 2012), or suspiciously anthropomorphic descriptions under which the properties of objects interact in exactly the same terms we see in human (or humanoid) experience. Morton says, for example, that "what spoons do when they scoop up soup is not very different to what I do when I talk about spoons... because intelligence and being alive are aesthetic appearances-for some other phenomenon, including the object in question" (2012, p.215). In Harman's famous example, the properties with which fire and cotton metaphorize one another, and those which withdraw (e.g. the cotton's "aroma" or the fire's "foreboding sparkle"), are also freely available to *us* humans (2005, p.170). There's little residual unfamiliarity at all. Nor does there seem to be much chance of our surprise at the revelations the world itself throws up. Both observations sit discordantly with object-oriented ontology's ability to engage with a genuine regard for more-than-human alterity, or a real decentring of the human on more-than-human terms⁸³.

In order to make these more audacious metaphysical claims, there appears to be an ambiguity in what is meant by the excess that withdrawing objects retain. For object-oriented ontologists, objects are irreducible to a metaphysics of relations; objects never manifest *themselves*. But this claim alone tells us nothing about *how* an object's alterity is retained through that excess. Doing justice to alterity, I've suggested, involves appreciating the important continuities and differences between entities. According to the Merleau-Pontian line I've been pursuing, an entity's excess must include (at least the power to instantiate) some properties or qualities which are straightforwardly unavailable to situated human 'objects' in virtue of the kinds of entity that they are. This thought also resonates with some of the object-oriented ontologists' official commitments. Harman, Morton, and Bogost do, after all, argue that one never directly addresses the thing-*in-itself* for the very same reason as Merleau-Ponty:

⁸³ Harman even charges Merleau-Ponty with anthropocentrism for acknowledging that one's situation makes perception *asymmetrical* (2005, pp.54-5). To his credit, Bogost recognises that "anthropomorphism is unavoidable, at least for us humans", and that metaphorism is particularly guilty in this regard (2012 p.64; p.76). Bogost thinks, however, that anthropomorphism is a tonic for anthropocentrism. The extent to which object-oriented ontologists retain somewhat species solipsistic norms undermines Bogost's claim.

that to do so would be to mistakenly reduce it to a situated (anthropocentric) perspective. However, in examples like those cited in the above paragraph, excess seems to mean something less radical; something more like ‘retains properties not *currently* shared with the other object’. Morton (2011, p.165) gestures towards this conservative interpretation when he explains object withdrawal by using the analogy of a coin which cannot show both sides to us at once, but which retains no substantive properties that are unavailable to us in-principle as human perceivers. One might never be able to see the coin’s other side *as* its other side (i.e. as its excess), but one *can* exhaustively describe the features of that side once one has flipped it over⁸⁴.

Accepting this conservative notion of excess would explain why Harman and Morton feel they may legitimately make the sort of determinate claims they do about the metaphorizing relationships between objects. If object-oriented ontologists do mean to propose this conservative meaning, however, they seem to be committed to the sort of naturalism that they distance themselves from on the well-justified grounds that it is incompatible with substantive nonhuman alterity. Thus, as Alaimo puts it in her paper on Bogost, although object-oriented ontologists put “forth an ostensibly posthumanist ontology, I would contend that [they retain] a humanist and masculinist sense of a disembodied subject” (2014, p.15).

Object-oriented ontologists recognise some of these dangers. They evidently *intend* excess to be taken in the more radical sense according to which all objects really do withdraw from one another in some substantive manner. Doing so, however, means that their (situated) claims about excess or withdrawal are incompatible with the desituated and totalizing metaphysics they advance. Moreover, in making any specific claims about the ‘true’ nature of other ‘objects’ (including those we’re attempting to liberate from uncritical instrumentalization: humpback whales, coral, crude oil, and so on), they are returned to the *de facto* idealism entailed by an absolutist account of the self/other relationship. Interestingly, if object-oriented ontology did conform to the radical interpretation of excess, it would *fail* Harman’s litmus test for correlationism because it couldn’t describe inter-objective communications (including intentional interactions between nonhumans) independently of a situated perspective that “distorts” or “caricatures” them⁸⁵. These are some of the reasons why Zahavi (2016, p.296) is surely right to argue that, through a radical doctrine of object withdrawal, Harman and his

⁸⁴ Vogel diagnoses a similar issue in Adorno’s work where objects retain an excess of only a “mundane” variety (1996, pp.73-4). This issue arises because Adorno rejects the concept of expressive truth required to take differential nonhuman intentional realities sufficiently seriously. For Adorno, expressive truth amounts to “the seemingly unbearable thesis that subjectivity presupposes facts while objectivity presupposes the subject” (Adorno, 1973, p.141; Vogel, 1996, p.189).

⁸⁵ Interestingly, Bogost (2012, pp.78-9) admits that second-level metaphorization takes place, at least in ethical matters, and cites Levinas as someone guilty of failing to take metaphorism seriously.

colleagues seemingly adopt the very metaphysical anti-realism Harman equates with *de facto* idealism.

As I see it, the underpinning problem with each of these positions is that speculative realism's stipulation that reality cannot be gleaned from within the correlation introduces a false dilemma: to absolutize the object pole (Meillassoux, Brassier, object-oriented ontology) or else collapse the distinction between poles at the level of the in-itself (Shaviro). Since both options are plausibly derivative from the phenomenological reality chiasmically co-expressed between world and body-subject, both erode alterity through egomorphic or anthropomorphic imposition. Why? In short: because the speculative realist requirement for unmediated access to the in-itself requires an objectivistic reduction to the same, yet 'the same' is always gleaned from a situated and partial (if not strictly singular) grip on the world. Moreover, by shifting the focus away from critical self-reflexivity, speculative realists appear to be in a worse position than their ecophenomenological rivals to recognise and attend to such problems. If I'm right about this, then, in lieu of recourse to the sort of radical reflection available to Merleau-Pontians, speculative realism is in a worse position than Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology to engage with more-than-human entities *in their alterity*.

5.3 So, *is* Merleau-Pontian Phenomenology Correlationist?

One important consideration here surrounds any putative 'realism' taken up. As has been noted, Merleau-Ponty *does* retain inescapable categories of truth and reality, but these are grounded in perceptual co-expression rather than transcendent acquaintance with a world-in-itself (*PP*, p.xvi). As was touched on in the previous chapter, the mere possibility that a perceptual expression might be subsequently shattered and replaced (as happens when we realise a 'rock' is really a lump of driftwood, or that a 'saloon' is really a façade) doesn't "amount to sceptical doubt" about the world "because, in short, doubt must be *lived*" (James, 2009, p.48; *VI*, p.40). Thus, the praxis of affirmation and seriousness with which the Merleau-Pontian phenomenologist addresses the *real* world mirrors that of avowed metaphysical realists.

One other salient aspect of the Merleau-Pontian account that should be emphasized here is that since one *is* one's body, one is implicated in the rest of the world via one's carnality. Thus, the relationship which underpins any expressive dialogue between parties is, as James notes, significantly more "intimate" (2007, p.512) than that between subject and object. As a Merleau-Pontian body-subject, one *does* have direct epistemic contact with the world in a manner not true of Kant, or perhaps Husserl, because one isn't ontologically bifurcated from that world in the manner that Cartesian subject/object dichotomies require. Speculative

realists, however, are unsuited to make sense of this epistemic relationship since their metaphor of ‘access’ requires the problematic reification of ontologically distinct poles from the outset⁸⁶.

Furthermore, through one’s embodiment, one should accept relations of significant ontological continuity with other animals and, albeit to a lesser extent, other (a-)biota. Kelly Burns, for example, notes that, for Merleau-Ponty, “the similarities in the ways that our bodies operate in the world lead to similarities in consciousness, which is not an isolated phenomenon, but a common experience” (2008, p.110). One shares significant bodily continuities with certain other mammals, for instance, so it’s plausible that at some ideal, pre-sedimentary level, there are common (if gradated and heterogeneous) nondiscursive grounds of experience that testify to a somewhat shared, *real* world⁸⁷. Once one dispenses with the requirement for a rigid subject/object or self/other binary, engagement with other entities *in their alterity* becomes feasible on these grounds.

We may go on. Elizabeth Grosz (2005) and Brian Massumi (2015) emphasize human-nonhuman connaturality through evolutionary continuity. Massumi does this by drawing attention to the evolutionary ‘supernormality’ seen in Herring Gull behaviour and which infuses human creativity⁸⁸. Merleau-Ponty (*SB*) makes a related point by appealing to the chiasmic Gestalts of matter, life, and mind, under which something novel (i.e. life or mind) emerges from its predecessor⁸⁹. Merleau-Ponty argues that, as embodied, ‘higher’ Gestalts themselves rely on ever-present but subordinated Gestalts that condition them. Subordinated levels are associated with more rudimentary ways of being-in or revealing the world.

⁸⁶ Perhaps the problem with advancing a blanket correlationist charge lies in assuming that ‘correlationists’ share a common commitment to Kantian metaphysical stipulations. Although Kant disavows the experiential uncoupling of concepts and intuitions, he reifies the transcendental subject in the manner problematized by speculative realists (1996, pp.193-4, B75/A51).

⁸⁷ Here, discourse “is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables that which can be said... [Discursive practices] are actually historically situated social conditions” (Barad, 2007 p.137). To think of *whole experiences* as discursive/nondiscursive is misleading because it implies the culture/nature dualism I resist. Nevertheless, the term ‘nondiscursive grounds of experience’ isn’t entirely unproblematic. The cross-blending of human vision, for example, is fundamentally nondiscursive under these terms, but still particular to a relatively narrow set of organisms. The world presented through binocular vision, however, remains irreducible *to* these biologically-specific grounds. Thus, the radically-reflective body-subject must continue to question to what extent any particular nondiscursive grounds afford narrowly species-specific expressions. I explore this issue further in chapter six.

⁸⁸ Despite often being wildly dissimilar, supernormal stimuli elicit stronger behavioural responses than the stimuli those behaviours have apparently evolved to suit. Massumi’s point is that relationships of “[s]upernormal dynamism” cannot be explained mechanistically or instinctually, since they involve a rudimentary sort of improvisation on the animal’s part (Massumi, 2015, p.4; see also Tinbergen, 1965; and Tinbergen and Perdeck, 1950).

⁸⁹ In the interest of doing justice to alterity, I suggest we resist Merleau-Ponty’s problematically rigid (and potentially anthropocentric) taxonomy, which is inessential to the broader claim about chiasmic kinship.

Nevertheless, as Toadvine contends, through the chiasmic contribution of subordinated levels to our grasp of the world, we share partial epistemological and ontological crossover via “lateral kinship” with other entities, since we’re connatural with them (2014, pp.274-5; VI, p.207-8)⁹⁰.

We’ve also seen Bennett argue that the quasi-agentic contributions of ‘other’ actants infuse human perception. If, at some level of description, as Bennett claims, we’re (interrelated) assemblages like pretty much everything else—abiotic entities included—we have further reason to believe that there exist *some* such nondiscursive grounds. Examples abound.

The above suggests that it is plausible, via the chiasmic interrelationship of subject and (other entities in the) world that one *is* as a body-subject, that one will be well-positioned to express, to some degree, how things are for (that element of) the world *itself*, *without violating the alterity requirement*⁹¹. In short: this is because the anthropocentrism charge fails to recognise that, as a body-subject, one isn’t *exclusively*, nor even *entirely*, ‘human’. To say otherwise would be to bifurcate nature and mind in a manner that has been compellingly spoken against by speculative realists and actually forms part of Morton’s argument *against* correlationism. Thus, we may respond to Meillassoux’s two objections to what phenomenological ‘correlationism’ entails. On the subjectivism problem, Meillassoux is mistaken because nondiscursive grounds give inescapable bases on which to assess truth claims. On the intersubjectivity problem, Meillassoux construes intersubjectivity too narrowly. By bifurcating mind and body along Cartesian lines, Meillassoux fails to recognise that one’s body implicates one *in* the world addressed, and Others therein, in an important, if partial, manner.

We can see, therefore, *contra* Morton’s charge, that there is a robust sense of realism taken up in Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology. Whilst phenomenologists can be realists in the sense of engaging with a concrete reality accessed noninferentially, however, they are unable

⁹⁰ Toadvine (2014) uses these tools to respond to Meillassoux’s ancestrality objection. If there is no moment of material history entirely alien to one’s perceptual milieu, then “there is no past which is absolutely past” (SB, p.207). The “elemental” past outstrips the emergence of consciousness and any subsequent subject/object schema. The reverberation of the elemental past *within* one’s grasp on the world, therefore, is the condition of personal time; it doesn’t *merely* occur as an object within it. Thus, one has the same ambiguous sort of continuity with the elemental past as one does with the perspectives of other animals. As is also the case with other animals, ontological continuity means that one needn’t set up the distant past as a distinct object-in-itself with which one is (correlatively) hyper-separated.

⁹¹ This thought doesn’t require that each thing *has* a perspective as in Shaviro’s panpsychism. Rather, where something *does* have a perspective, the radically-reflective body-subject may be able to acknowledge the meanings in such a perspective to *some* (gradated) degree. Where something *lacks* a perspective, by being attentive to shared nondiscursive grounds of experience that underpin expressions of the world, the radically-reflective body-subject may again glean some degree of insight to other perspectives of that thing (as is required by the view-from-everywhere).

and unwilling to commit to the definition of realism (i.e. by addressing a metaphysically distinct thing-in-itself) required by speculative realists. Given the potentially significant crossover between ontologies and epistemologies, if the dispute about whether Merleau-Pontian phenomenology is correlationist turns *entirely* on a terminological point about the definition of ‘realism’, then the charge seems to be empty, or not very serious.

There is, however, a remaining strand of the correlationist charge we have hitherto glossed. Given that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists refuse to exhaustively assimilate ‘how things are for the world’ into ‘how things are for me’, this leaves them open to Meillassoux’s *modified* correlationist charge, which holds that “[w]e can’t know what the reality of the object in itself is because we can’t distinguish between properties which are supposed to belong to the object and properties belonging to the subjective access to the object” (Meillassoux *et al*, 2007, p.409)⁹². This claim, in part, I accept. It’s exactly this sort of issue that necessitates a radical habitus of critique in the first place. However, since Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists deny the basic ontological presuppositions which underpin the charge, this admission still doesn’t make Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology correlationist in any substantive or problematic sense. Moreover, given that the radically-reflective framework of Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is driven by (or is amenable to) a desire to better understand the more-than-human world on its own terms, the critically self-reflexive outlook that this admission necessitates seems to be at odds with the detrimental outcomes supposedly caused by correlationism. Furthermore, to the extent that it is *speculative* rather than dogmatic, especially given my arguments in section 5.2 above, neither can speculative realism plausibly escape Meillassoux’s modified charge. By drawing our attention away from critical self-reflexivity and, therefore, overstating the surety of our distinctions between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ properties, speculative realists seem to be at greater risk of instigating and perpetuating such outcomes.

5.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I’ve suggested that engaging with more-than-human alterity provides compelling motivation for *something like* correlationism, however, Merleau-Ponty outright denies the ontological primacy of the ‘subject’ and ‘object’ terms on which the correlationist charge is built. Thus, I’ve suggested that, whilst Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology remains

⁹² Another way of reading this claim is to focus on the *possibility* of making a distinction between properties that are supposed to belong to the object rather than subjective access to that object. Read this way, there *is* a difference between speculative realism and Merleau-Pontian phenomenology: the former may make determinate claims about which properties belong to the object-*in-itself*, the latter cannot. However, I’ve already argued that the ability to do so is either unimportant, or rests on metaphysical stipulations that preclude appreciation of more-than-human alterity.

hospitable to the appreciation of more-than-human alterity in the requisite sense, this needn't make Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology correlationist. There are two reasons why Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology might nevertheless be understood to be *something like* a correlationist philosophy. The first is that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology cannot satisfy the speculative realist's objectivistic stipulations about what metaphysical 'realism' consists in. The second is that ecophenomenologists cannot straightforwardly cleave contribution of 'object' from 'subject' in the requisite manner for them to ascribe properties to things-*in-themselves*. But neither of these should be particularly troubling. I've argued that the former stipulation is at best, unimportant and, at worst, harmful, because of the violent and dualistic assumptions it conceals. As for the latter, I've argued that the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist's refusal to cleave subject and object poles constitutes a strength inasmuch as it disrupts the sort of transcendental fiction that limits or discourages critical self-reflexivity about our tendencies to overwrite more-than-human alterity. I contend, therefore, that it is implausible to claim that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is more likely to licence colonial violence against the more-than-human world than its markedly anticorrelationist rivals. The 'correlationist charge' itself, therefore, provides no reason to think that a Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenological praxis is incompatible with the goals I set for it.

Chapter 6: Androcentrism, Nondiscursive Grounds, and the Hyper-Dialectic

I begin this chapter by considering a narrower version of the correlationist charge levelled primarily by feminist philosophers. This charge holds that, whilst the conclusion of the previous chapter may be true and phenomenologists face no *in-principle* impossibility of addressing the more-than-human world on its own terms, phenomenology is, in practice, poorly disposed to address matters of alterity. According to this narrower critique, phenomenology is a particularly dangerous form of something like correlationism because it is somewhat underpinned by *androcentric* norms. Thus, proponents claim, rather than doing justice to the primordial or anonymous nature of one's being-in-the-world, phenomenologists—and Merleau-Ponty in particular—universalize situated master perspectives in a manner that speaks against sensitivity to the ecofeminist concerns we explored in chapter three.

I think that this charge is a more serious one. However, whilst it can be satisfactorily disarmed, doing so requires exploring Merleau-Ponty's metatheoretical commitments. I will defer discussion about these until the third section of this chapter. Before getting there, I firstly explore the objection that phenomenology is implicated in androcentrism because of its basic reliance on situated experience to provide normative guidance about the meanings available for expression. Unlike the early Husserl, however, Merleau-Ponty, doesn't *obviously* universalize any such guidance. Nevertheless, in the second section of the chapter, I argue that, insofar as Merleau-Ponty may provide the resources to navigate the Scylla and Charybdis of correlationism and naturalism, he *must* retain some account of the nondiscursive grounds of experience which licence true expressions of the world's own meanings. I contend, therefore, that concerns about the androcentric misattribution of these allegedly nondiscursive grounds *do* threaten the legitimacy of the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenological praxis I defend, because they locate within it tendencies to normalize the problematic androcentric and anthropocentric heritage that I employ phenomenological tools to interrogate. The remainder of the chapter is concerned with how to respond to this narrower correlationist charge.

I contend that, although Merleau-Ponty himself makes numerous errors concerning the 'anonymous' body schema which cannot be entirely disarmed in their own right, these errors are subject to correction from within the wider Merleau-Pontian schema. I argue that we should understand Merleau-Ponty's own theoretical failures as part of a greater contribution to an intersubjective hyper-dialectic which aims to discern nondiscursive grounds of

experience shared between situated body-subjects. Moreover, I argue, this sort of hyper-dialectic may also uncover problematic sediment which would otherwise remain invisible to its proprietor. Understanding the philosopher's metatheoretical role as an interlocutor within this wider hyper-dialectic mitigates the charge of androcentrism and further supports the suitability of a radically-reflective ecophenomenological praxis to address nonhuman others in their alterity.

6.1 Phenomenology as Foundationalist Correlationism

In chapter three, I argued that important ecofeminist insights about our relationships with the more-than-human world should be reconfigured through an ecophenomenological lens. The grounds of this claim lie in Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology's unique ability to address more-than-human entities in *their* alterity. I argued that, particularly because of their focus on the contribution of motor intentionality to the differential character of the worlds we inhabit, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists may engage with more-than-human entities in an appropriately radical fashion that is incompatible with the naturalism found in much ecofeminist literature.

These claims might seem odd given the widespread hostility feminist philosophers have historically displayed towards phenomenology. Many argue that phenomenology is not up to the task of addressing alterity because, they claim, phenomenology relies on the decontextualised universalization of certain privileged experiences or 'essential' structures of consciousness as *the* foundational norms by which 'the things themselves' are purportedly revealed⁹³.

In some cases, their concerns appear to be well-founded. I'm thinking, for example, about Husserl's *transcendental reduction*, under which

I lose nothing of that which existed for me naively, particularly that which manifested itself as really being. On the contrary... *I come to know the world itself*, only now I come to know it *as it always was for me* and fundamentally had to be for me: as a transcendental phenomenon.

(Husserl, cited in Urban, 2016, p.466)

On Husserl's account, Petr Urban explains, "transcendental phenomenology is not an introspective study of consciousness, 'but a radical enquiry into the world'" (2016, p.466). However, as is widely recognised, Husserl himself often conflates the character of

⁹³ See Scott (1992), Irigaray (1993), Butler (1989), or Sullivan (1997).

‘transcendental’ phenomena with that of objects dictated by the implicit sediment of Gramscian ‘common sense’.

Here is a salient example: Husserl claims that “[e]ach intentional experience is either an objectifying act or has its basis in such an act” (2001, p.167)⁹⁴. He goes so far as to claim that the “intentional and epistemic essence[s]” of acts by which objects are truly revealed are trans-historical, stable, and must hold true for any “minded” creature which can ‘understand’ the world it inhabits (2001, pp.314-6). Husserl thereby subsumes norms of embodied, operative intentionality under specific norms of act intentionality. Act intentionality is concerned with thematising judgements about how things appear to consciousness. However, as Merleau-Ponty’s beetles demonstrate, operative intentionality may lack an intentional object over and above the intentional act itself.

By making objectification a transcendental condition of experience, Husserl firstly gives act intentional norms a certain intellectualistic priority over what appears to be the ordinary mode of perception for dung beetles or earthworms, as well as that which significantly underpins human perception. Husserl also thereby betrays a lack of critical self-reflexivity about the intentional salience of his own situated embodiment. In doing so, Husserl smuggles in important value-judgements about what is ‘essential’ or ‘primordially’ available to experience and, correspondingly, ‘the things themselves’. Despite his protestations, Husserl’s account is plausibly infected, for instance, by sediment of the mind/nature dualism which unduly grants the faculty of ‘understanding’ only to conscious ‘subjects’, who are *defined* in opposition to ‘objects’. Under this schema, consciousness is of the neo-Cartesian variety and so is cleaved from material embodiment in ways that renders Husserl hostile to recognising heterogenous nonhuman intentionalities from the outset.

Moreover, I’ve suggested that the disembodied conception of mind that Husserl seems to employ in the *transcendental* reduction is both androcentric and intimately related to the project of anthropocentric mastery that I employ ecophenomenology to disrupt. Husserl’s latent dualism is exemplified by the fact that he takes an *objectifying* mode of revealing—the mode of revealing perhaps *most* detrimental to positive engagement with more-than-human entities—to be *the* primordial one by which essences are revealed. If so, then Husserl’s oversight is a major one. As we’ve seen Plumwood repeatedly argue, however, such an oversight is easier for those in the master perspective to gloss, since their political privilege makes them significantly less vulnerable to the negative effects of the violence objectification

⁹⁴ Harman (2005, p.24) cites this passage in support of his own cause. This strengthens my contention that object-oriented ontology is insufficiently self-reflective about the (anthropocentric) sediment it imports.

licences. ‘Non-Western’ subsistence farmers (particularly women) and nonhuman animals are, after all, hit harder by anthropogenic desertification linked to ‘excessive resource consumption’ than those invested in ‘Western’ agribusiness.

Husserlian errors of the above sort, the argument goes, are symptomatic of a wider problem with phenomenology: phenomenology takes *how the world always was for me* (or the reflective idealization of it) to be the neutral, universal ground for epistemology and ontology. In doing so, phenomenology takes insufficiently seriously that any reduction or reflection is always carried out within the world, and so is prone to gloss the sedimented assumptions and commitments which partly constitute (at least) part of any of its phenomenological revelations. Phenomenology allegedly thereby ends up retaining the same sort of dualistic heritage that proves hostile to those who have been marked as ‘other’ by the very structures we’re aiming to address, because those Others deviate from the norms (as they apparently ‘*always*’ were) of the occupied centre. Phenomenology, however, seems to be in a worse position than its non-phenomenological rivals to attend to errors of onto-epistemological hegemony. This is because phenomenology does seem to be ‘correlationist’ in the sense that, unlike under a strongly metaphysically realist naturalism, there is nothing concrete outside of one’s grounding phenomenology which might serve as a yardstick of truth with which to hold one’s experiences to account.

Phenomenology’s problems don’t end there. We’ve seen that phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty accept that one cannot make another’s consciousness present to oneself as one’s own without collapsing the very alterity that one intends to do justice to. If one attempted this feat (arguably, like Husserl above), one would succumb to Levinas’ objection that phenomenology entails the ‘reduction of the other to the same’. The upshot of these phenomenologists’ admissions, however, is that one can never simply empathetically ‘check’ one’s own experience for fidelity with Others’ in one’s attempt to discern the meanings licenced by, say, a ‘depleted’ rainforest.

Neither can one just straightforwardly *ask* Others about their experiences to determine which common meanings are phenomenologically basic. Joan Scott (1992, pp.24-5) contends, for instance, that, even in the human case, one cannot unproblematically “appeal to experience as uncontested evidence and as an originary point of explanation—as a foundation upon which analysis is based”. Doing so, Scott argues, makes visible only *situated* experience, and actively *conceals* the socio-political sediment that betrays “the constructed nature of [that] experience”. Thus, the experiential testimony of Others—even those outside the master position—provides an unreliable guide to the primordial meanings licenced by the world

because they too are prone to mistake hegemonic sediment for the world's essential meanings. We saw in chapter three, for example, that some early ecofeminists mistook the sediment of neo-Cartesian ideology for essential features of both their subjectivity, and experiences of being 'closer to nature' than men. Likewise, as Sally Fischer notes, Irigaray contends that the pervasive problem with liberal feminism is that it "describe[s] what a woman is within the horizon of a male subject's culture" (Fischer, 2007, p.208; Irigaray, 1996, p.61). Saul's (2013) research on implicit bias supports Irigaray's contention. Women, her research suggests, are as likely as men to perceive women's academic work to be qualitatively inferior, even when the only difference is the name of the putative author. Subjects from ethnic minorities are also no less quick to match negative adjectives to black faces than subjects of other ethnicities. If, as I have suggested, the biases described above are intimately linked to dualistic metatheoretical assumptions which also licence denigration of the more-than-human world, then we have reason to believe that these too will remain similarly hidden from the ecophenomenologist.

Understood in the way I express it above, by purporting to grant the essential foundations of knowledge, phenomenology ends up being not only anthropocentric, but also androcentric, Eurocentric, hetero-normative, and so on⁹⁵. Furthermore, because phenomenology is fundamentally introverted in deferring to lived-experience for criteria of truth, it isn't clear that the tools can be established within phenomenology to dig itself outside of the solipsistic trap in which it is apparently mired. If so, then my optimism about ecophenomenology's potential to disrupt our submerged mass would be ultimately misplaced. Phenomenology, the argument goes, only ever really addresses other entities in a manner that conforms to an androcentric purview which phenomenologists are wont to impose on nonhuman entities in an anthropocentric, top-down manner. This is exactly what seems to happen in Husserl's case above.

It's important to emphasize that, unlike the objections addressed in the preceding chapter, our present objection doesn't hold that there is any in-principle incompatibility between (eco-)phenomenology and (more-than-human) alterity. I've argued that the fact that phenomenology begins from a situated perspective doesn't *entail* any sort of solipsism unless one already adopts a set of radical (e.g. subject/object, self/other, or mind/nature) dualisms. Rather, this narrower sort of objection holds that phenomenologists are, in practice, unable to do justice to (more-than-human) alterity because phenomenology is problematically predisposed to -centric essentialism, and is poorly equipped to address that failing.

⁹⁵ I will hereafter refer to these interconnected group solipsisms under the banner of 'androcentrism'.

6.2 A Radically Antifoundationalist Merleau-Pontian Response

Nevertheless, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology isn't *obviously* subject to the problem of onto-epistemological imposition outlined above because, beyond its contention that perception is irreducibly embodied, it makes no explicit claims about the stable, trans-historical, or desituated (structures of) experience. Merleau-Ponty continually disavows the objectivistic project of 'high-altitude thought' and the related project of radical transcendental abstraction that the early Husserl, for instance, seems to be engaged in. In fact, I've argued that the value of Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology lies largely in its appreciation of situated bodies and their differential contributions to the divergent meanings that the world permits. Thus, Merleau-Ponty would resist much of the Husserlian dogma above, especially the point about the universal 'essences' of phenomena as presented to (what are truly heterogenous and ambiguously) 'minded' entities.

Moreover, we've seen that radical critical self-reflexivity about habitual sediment is focal under the Merleau-Pontian remit. Critical self-reflexivity is also required about the revelations yielded by radical reflection itself (and any reflective distortions therein), which is why philosophy must be *unrestingly* hyper-dialectical. This requirement is made clear in the preface to the *Phenomenology* where Merleau-Ponty contends that *in* reflection, one cannot separate oneself from the world *of* reflection, so

Husserl's essences are destined to bring back all the living relationships of experience, as the fisherman's net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed.

(*PP*, p.xv)

It seems inevitable, then, that the sediment of one's historical and political situation would be implicit in the background of any (reflective) account of self-knowledge and any purportedly 'primordial' ways of revealing the more-than-human world. This is why Merleau-Ponty continually resists making claims about any privileged perceptions or foundational ways of revealing the world. Merleau-Ponty does, after all, famously claim that "man [sic] is a historical idea and not a natural species... there is in human existence no unconditioned possession" (*PP*, p.170).

By claiming to understand embodied existence within its "concrete historical situation" rather than through a wholly transcendental lens, or by adopting the mechanistic framework of "naturalistic ideology", Butler notes, Merleau-Ponty appears well-equipped to provide a non-reductive, *radically antifoundationalist*, existential phenomenology (1989, p.85). But, as Butler recognises, this interpretation is, in the final analysis, implausible. The reasons for this

implausibility, I (unlike Butler) contend, come about *because* of the seriousness with which Merleau-Ponty engages with the fundamental embodiment of intentionality⁹⁶. In what follows, I will argue that, whilst Merleau-Pontian phenomenology is non-reductive, it cannot be radically antifoundationalist in Butler's sense.

6.2.1 Oksala's Model

To clarify some problems with the radically antifoundationalist interpretation of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, it will be instructive to address a specific formulation of it. Johanna Oksala (2006) advances one such model. Oksala begins by accepting that, if one is to take seriously the importance of embodiment, the body schema cannot be an inessential part of the Merleau-Pontian picture. We saw in chapter two that one's body schema is intimately linked to one's expressions of the world because one's bodily abilities and dispositions delineate its basic intentional physiognomy. The role of the body schema is also essential to the potential for nonanthropocentrism that we find in Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology. By emphasizing the contribution of one's bodily abilities and embodied expectations to perceptual meaning, the body schema disrupts the purported neutrality of the dualistic and objectivistic revelations otherwise licenced by scientific naturalism. Thus, the body schema brings into clear focus the fact that our worlds are tied to the bodies that we are, and that our bodies, and therefore our worlds, may differ in dramatic respects.

However, like Jean Grimshaw, Oksala denies that even in the human case the Merleau-Pontian phenomenologist *need* attribute "some kind of ontological priority" (Grimshaw, 1999, p.103) to any particular kind of body schema—and, thus, one mode of revealing—over another. The 'foundationalist' interpretation that Oksala rejects is "a philosophical position that seeks in an analysis of the body's structures a universal and stable foundation for subjectivity" (2006, p.211)⁹⁷. Instead, Oksala makes similar arguments to Heinämaa's about

⁹⁶ I don't discuss Butler's specific objection here because, like Foulter (2013), I think that Butler straightforwardly mistakes Merleau-Ponty's *descriptive* analysis of Schneider's sexual schema for a *hetero-normative* one.

⁹⁷ This way of using the term 'foundationalism' is Oksala's. Her case isn't helped by her lack of clarity. She slips from suggesting that there are no entirely nondiscursive *experiences* (which I accept, but which doesn't entail radical antifoundationalism about the body schema), to holding that there are no nondiscursive *grounds* of experience in the body schema (which I deny). Thus, there is some ambiguity about whether she means to refer to the sort of epistemological foundationalism concerning the putative existence of a nonconceptual 'given' at the level of experience (which divides Hubert Dreyfus and John McDowell), or something more fundamental about the nondiscursive limits of the body's intentional structures. Oksala is an unrepentant Butlerian. The body, for Oksala, plays more-or-less the same performative role that the *psyche* does for Butler. Bearing this in mind, I think that the ambiguity in Oksala's account might derive from the sort of mistake I identify in footnote 99 below. Nonetheless, Oksala's position is at least consistently antifoundationalist insofar as she denies foundational priority to any specific discourse, rather than discourse more broadly.

the ubiquity of intentional heritage to argue that, for the suitably critical Merleau-Pontian, there is no essential or pre-sedimentary reality *at all*. Under Oksala's reading, "transcendental intersubjectivity—language, tradition, and community—is understood as *the reality-constituting principle* providing the conditions of possibility for all forms of subjectivity as well as objective reality" (2006, p.218, emphasis mine).

Oksala goes on to argue that her interpretation needn't entail solipsism or disengagement with Others in the manner that proves problematic for absolute models of alterity. She focuses on Merleau-Ponty's claim that sharing a world with Others entails that one cannot reduce the world to one's *own* 'intentional threads', because "the philosopher cannot fail to draw others with him into his reflective retreat" (*PP*, p.361). On Oksala's reading, what Merleau-Ponty means to say is that something's meanings cannot be reduced to one's own if it is experienced by another consciousness within a common *cultural* framework. Thus, Oksala argues, culturally-situated intersubjectivity is the basis of there being any 'objective' reality at all, and "social normality" (2006, p.220) dictates the normativity of our intersubjective accounts of that reality. If 'social normality' is, therefore, the primary bearer of meaning, Oksala argues, Merleau-Ponty's account is reconcilable with Butler's insofar as body-subjects are not "historically situated" in a world; both body-subject and world are *historically constituted* (Butler, 1989, p.90; Oksala, 2006, p.221).

6.2.2 Nondiscursive Grounds of Experience

I will set aside the many exegetical problems with Oksala's interpretation. After all, our present enquiry is about the plausibility of a Merleau-Pontian account rather than the faithfulness of any given interpretation. The real problems with Oksala's appropriation of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology lie in the severe risks involved in allying experience too closely with discourse. Here, I take my cue from Alcoff, who argues that the poststructuralist feminists' (e.g. Scott or Butler) ultimate error is to think that "experience and subjectivity are produced through the interplay of discourses" and, therefore, that "the ultimate source of knowledge about social meanings cannot be 'experience', or, worse, 'perception', but language and textuality" (2000, p.252)⁹⁸. Under this sort of reading—which Oksala explicitly subscribes to—phenomenology is robbed of its primarily revelatory nature. Lived-experience becomes discursively constructed rather than an irreducibly basic means of revealing the world's meanings.

⁹⁸ Alcoff's analysis should be extended to include discursive grounds which are less clearly textual (e.g. ideological power relations), but her larger point still stands.

However, as Alcoff argues, the aforementioned poststructuralists invoke a false dilemma between an “epistemology of experience” and an “epistemology of theory” in attempting to discern truths about the world (2000, p.254). This dilemma is invoked because of simplistic analyses of exactly the ilk we see in Oksala (2006, p.221) whereby one has two options: *either* “conditions of possibility for perception” and subjectivity are thought to be structured in the same “ahistorical or universal” way that Husserl implies and Scott decries (in which case one adopts the former, naïve, epistemology); *otherwise* perceptual schemas are “dynamic and developing structures derived from our cultural environment” (in which case one adopts an epistemology under which the sort of (curiously disembodied and desituated) ‘theory’ Oksala advances alone explains experience and subjectivity)⁹⁹. However, as Alcoff argues, “[o]ne need only have recourse to Hegel’s concept of *Erfahren* to develop an alternative account that understands experience as epistemically indispensable, but never epistemically self-sufficient” (2000, p.254). Given his account of the dynamic ambiguity of the body schema, Merleau-Ponty would surely agree:

It is impossible to superimpose on man [sic] a lower level of behaviour which one chooses to call ‘natural’, followed by a manufactured cultural world. Everything is both manufactured and natural in a man, as it were, in the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behaviour which does not owe something to purely biological being—and which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life.

(PP, p.189)

If our two epistemologies *were* mutually exclusive then attention to historico-cultural sediment implicit in the body-subject’s way of revealing the world would provide good reason to plump for a discursive constructivism (or, like Scott, an outright epistemological scepticism) over a naïve, ultimately hegemonic, phenomenological account¹⁰⁰. Alcoff,

⁹⁹ We see the same basic error in Butler’s *metaphysical* reduction of gender to discourse because one has no *epistemic* access to gender independent of discourse. However, Alcoff notes, “in the first case, Butler is arguing that gender as a concept is discursively constructed, and in the second case she is arguing that gender is discursively constructed” (2006, p.167). Butler may be right that gender isn’t a natural kind. However, Butler fails to take seriously the material features of bodies which nevertheless ‘really do cluster’, as we saw Stone argue in chapter three. There are further parallels here with the speculative realist claim that, by rejecting unmediated epistemic access to things-in-themselves, phenomenology becomes idealistic. Interestingly, both Meillassoux (2008, p.27) and Scott (1992, p.23) explicitly claim that the implausibility of naïve realism means that knowledge claims rooted in perception are irredeemably correlationist.

¹⁰⁰ Some Merleau-Pontians like Kenneth Liberman take up the same false dilemma between experience and theory when *defending* a foundationalist body schema. Consider the following: “[c]ertainly, there is not any unmediated experience for reflection, but for our bodies? To the body and perception, I believe the answer can be yes—for instance, is experiencing an earthquake, or a sunrise, primarily a cultural or linguistic experience?” (2007, p.39). The standard foundationalist interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s body-schema is misplaced because, *as lived*, the body schema is neither entirely fixed and universal, nor the mere product of discourse, but something between the two.

however, uses the example of sexual violence to demonstrate that this move would be unwarranted and dangerous, given the falsity of the dilemma.

Alcoff thinks it is a grave “metaphysical error” (2000, p.256) to believe that reality is discursively *constituted* in the manner that Oksala, Butler, and Scott suggest. Alcoff supports her contention with reference to Foucault’s example of a “farm hand... somewhat simple-minded”, who, in 1867, was detained for life following a sexual encounter in which he offered “a few pennies to the little girls for favours the older ones refused him” (Foucault, 1998, pp.31-2). Foucault’s conjecture is that this incident marked a watershed in which “these timeless gestures, these barely furtive pleasures between simple-minded adults and alert children” (1998, p.32) were forever transformed through ideological discourse. Once supplemented by phenomenological description, however, we see that the role of discourse is here fundamentally overplayed. Alcoff draws upon contemporary testimony provided by children who have been paid for sexual encounters by adults. The horror of these accounts strongly suggests that, given the vulnerability of children and their bodies, the underpinning phenomenology experienced by children in these events is such that they simply *couldn’t* exist as shared events of simple pleasure. Rather, the “meanings” here “inhere partly in the embodied experiences themselves” (2000, p.269). Alcoff suggests, therefore, that there must exist some common *nondiscursive grounds* to embodied experience which, by reducing experience to discourse, we unduly preclude from our onto-epistemological investigations of the world.

Alcoff uses the above to argue that one must emphasize, as Merleau-Ponty does, that although, in one’s situated experience, one cannot easily differentiate the discursive and nondiscursive, both *grounds* exist. Of course, Foucault is right to contend that discourse has material effects on our identities and the meanings that the world reveals. Technological Enframing, for instance, derives largely from ideological discourse but shapes our accounts of which entities exist and how they are properly characterized. Technology may even cause some things like ‘the labour market’ to come into existence. However, this admission doesn’t legitimate *reducing* the meanings of the Rhine, food waste deposits, glaciers, ocean acidification, or destabilized ecosystems *to* discourse surrounding them. Neither does it mean that, as the example of sexual violence illustrates, there is nothing primordially nondiscursive that really does ground our concrete experiences of them, at least in part.

The real issue is more intricate than the aforementioned false dilemma lets on. Both kinds of grounds show up in experience and it’s a difficult reflective task to tease them apart. Even our experiences of pain, for instance, cannot be *entirely* nondiscursive because those

experiences are infused or delineated by sediment. Addressing the racially-motivated assault of a black colleague, Sonia Kruks writes that “I cannot share my colleague’s experience fully, but neither is it entirely closed to me” (2006, p.44). Kruks’ own experience isn’t infused in the *same* way by the lived experience of racist politics or objectifying prejudice. Nevertheless, since it’s essential to emphasize *both* nondiscursive and discursive grounds of experience, “[t]here is no conceivable alternative basis or ultimate justification for knowledge other than my experience in the world” (Alcoff, 2000, p.262). This is another key reason why, in doing justice to more-than-human reality, we *must* retain an ecophenomenological model which resists making all onto-epistemological judgements contingent on discourse alone.

But there is another important moral to Alcoff’s cautionary tale. We’ve seen that the meanings that the world permits body-subjects to express are tied to our embodied situations within that world. For Merleau-Ponty, one’s mode of bodily attunement to the world cannot be entirely separated from the grounds that are subsequently expressed as its meaning. This is because, as our marble example in chapter two illustrates, the dialectic between body and world delineates one’s self-experience and one’s experience of the world. To participate in this dialectic, one must begin with a body of some form or another as one’s basic means of being a body-subject in the first place. However, as Uexküll and Merleau-Ponty’s work on nonhumans neatly shows, the body cannot begin as a mere intentional nullity. Bearing this in mind, we’re able to see the central problem with Oksala’s radical antifoundationalism: Oksala fails to recognise that body-subjects must share some irreducibly nondiscursive commonalities in bodily norms that *allow* nondiscursive grounds of experience to express themselves the ways they do. There must, in short, be some minimal limits to the discursive plasticity of the body schema that the radical antifoundationalist cannot concede. There does seem to be, after all, something about the fundamental contributions of *both* body-subject *and* world that delimits the phenomena experienced by the children Alcoff refers to¹⁰¹. However, their experiences cannot be wholly ‘subjective’ in any accurate sense because the world itself truly licences these (harrowing, painful) expressions through those nondiscursive grounds.

If I’m right about this then the perceptual anonymity of which Merleau-Ponty speaks must refer to more than the operative or pre-reflective character of one’s bodily communion with

¹⁰¹Minimally: the possession of pain receptors and certain neurological capacities. However, I’m wary of the scientific reductionism one courts by neglecting to situate these biological features in the context of embodied intentionality. In the case Alcoff discusses, the following might be relevant: the self-givenness of (relative) bodily integrity, the experiential primacy of phenomenal (i.e. ‘personal’) space over ‘objective’ space, the operative *capacity* to experience the meaning of danger *as* danger, and so on. For those who worry that these intentional norms might seem unduly sophisticated for an unremarkable body-subject to possess as a child, we should be reminded that each of these capacities is plausibly enjoyed by plant life, to some degree.

the world. As I argued in chapter four, sedimented habits may be anonymous in this sense. One isn't normally attentive to one's objectifying attitude when one uses cheaply and exploitatively produced consumer goods, or when one consumes palm oil products without regard for their wider resonances, for instance. But as we can now see, discursive habits of seeing cannot exhaust embodied experiences *entirely* without distorting either the meanings available for expression, or their basic means of expression in the first place. We may say with confidence, therefore, that although the body schema is dynamic and subject to sediment via the intentional arc, any plausible account of it must retain some structural commonalities that are amenable to expressing certain nondiscursive grounds of experience.

The above contention comes with two caveats. Firstly, I don't mean to risk the homogenising suggestion that *all* bodies possess the same fundamental schematic norms, even from within a given 'species'. It's at least *prima facie* plausible that heterogeneous human bodies (e.g. in terms of age or sex) have differential bodily ways of being-in-the world and, thus, experience different nondiscursive grounds of experience¹⁰². Irigaray suggests as much in her later essentialist phase when she says: "Men and women are corporeally different. This biological difference leads to others: in constructing subjectivity, in connecting to the world, in relating" (Irigaray, cited in Stone, 2003, p.62). As I explained in chapter three, however, I have concerns about the extent to which Irigaray thinks that these bodily differences cause a binary rift in experience. I suspect that, as Kruks' example of pain suggests, at least some nondiscursive grounds are shared between (almost) all humans, at least. My concern, as ever, is to do justice to continuity and difference.

Secondly, I'm also not making the standard foundationalist claim that nondiscursive grounds may only be revealed by bodily structures which cannot change. It's perhaps less clear, for instance, that equivalent scenarios to Alcoff's in which consenting adults are paid for sexual favours *couldn't* truly present nondiscursive grounds of 'simple pleasure' between parties. Furthermore, it seems plausible, as Kruks (2006, p.42) claims, that the world's nondiscursive meanings (especially where these concern reproductive justice) *might* differ between pre- and postmenopausal women. Much more work needs to be done on these and related questions. However, that work goes beyond the scope of this thesis. My focus *here* is twofold: to emphasize the importance of nondiscursive grounds of experience, and to explore some plausible implications for how we might understand the meanings body-subjects locate in the more-than-human world.

¹⁰² I refer to 'species', 'sex', etc. for economy of expression. I don't mean to uncritically reify them as natural kinds.

By readmitting nondiscursive grounds of experience, however, the Merleau-Pontian phenomenologist is once again vulnerable to the charge of onto-epistemological imposition whereby the product of discursive sediment is taken to be primordially nondiscursive. Our problem, it might be said, merely shifts from the revelation of ‘the things themselves’ via essential structures of consciousness (as in Husserl), to primordial structures of embodied perception (in Merleau-Ponty). I shall return to this issue in section 6.3, but first we need to appreciate why nondiscursive grounds are so important for the Merleau-Pontian *ecophenomenologist* specifically.

6.2.3 Nondiscursive Grounds and Ecophenomenology

There are manifold reasons why attention to nondiscursive grounds of experience is particularly important to my ecophenomenological project. Some of these we’ve already explored:

1. Failing to identify nondiscursive grounds undermines the agency and resistance of the more-than-human world, recognition of which is politically significant insofar as it disrupts our illusions of anthropocentric mastery. By reducing experience to discourse, one unduly denies the (quasi-)agentic import of nondiscursive grounds of experience both ‘external’ (e.g. the ‘arresting’ power of a pile of rubbish) and ‘internal’ (e.g. the cognitive effects of fats consumed) to one’s body.
2. The constructivism that Oksala reverts to in lieu of nondiscursive grounds of experience relies on a representationalist (or idealist) schema which dualistically cleaves agentic human ‘culture’ (*as discourse*) from nonhuman ‘nature’ (*as resource*: inert and plastic matter). By leaving this dualism intact, we unduly limit the extent to which we may disrupt the colonial attitudes which precipitate our crisis situation.
3. The above cleavage operates in a manner that, because of its neo-Cartesian heritage, tends towards theoretical positions which underplay their embodied and situated nature. This is problematic because (as we saw in the speculative realists’ case), by detaching theory from one’s operative phenomenological opening, one becomes more prone to problematically anthropomorphize the meanings ‘reality’ itself yields.
4. Not only is the above desituation of theory misleading, it also serves to veil the material relationality in which our embodiment implicates us. As Bennett shows, by failing to address our material relationality, we’re more prone to hyperbolize our autonomy, and to further misconstrue the (somewhat unpredictable) extent to which

our attitudes and behaviours may impact on the more-than-human world. Both errors are deeply problematic insofar as they perpetuate problematic illusions about possessing and controlling the more-than-human world.

5. The identification of nondiscursive grounds allows the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist to evade correlationism and the disastrous environmental consequences licenced by species solipsism and/or *de facto* idealism. Nondiscursive grounds are, after all, our unmediated point of contact with the world itself. By distancing the body schema from its nondiscursive grounds, Oksala (2006, pp.219-220) explicitly reduces the view-from-everywhere to a reality *constituted* by human intersubjectivities in the manner spoken against by Meillassoux and Harman.
6. Perhaps most importantly, nondiscursive grounds are required to facilitate radical reflection. Radical reflection, recall, consists of two strands, the first of which seeks to uncover the meanings that the world licences in any situated expression via the basic intentional structures one co-constructs with it. I think it's now plausible to describe this strand in terms of attention to *nondiscursive* grounds of experience. Our second strand, on the other hand, seeks to identify where sediment or reflective distortions are given misleading onto-epistemological status. We're now able to appreciate that this second strand of radical reflection has two roles: attention to *discursive grounds of experience*, and attention to *nondiscursive grounds of experience which lack universality*: where the intentional grounds one extends to nonhuman entities (e.g. beetles, forests, or glaciers) are narrowly anthropomorphic, and so on.

Permit me to return to a few examples. When reflecting suitably radically, one recognises that the sky's phenomenal blueness isn't either straightforwardly volitional or acquired; its meaning is nondiscursively driven by the world itself. The sky is unavoidably blue, at least for perceivers with visual systems that can see it, and this, in part, is why the sky's blueness is given anonymously in human (but not canine) experience. Given that radical reflection reveals the metaphysical stipulations of extensional realism to be more significantly discursive, however, we shouldn't see that lens as fundamental in the same sense. Given the parameters of a certain regional 'cut' (i.e. given certain normative assumptions about what is available for description, which observational data or spatio-temporal scales are relevant, exclusionary measurement apparatuses, and so on), it *may* really be true—as Callicott claims—that

ecosystems are reducible to energy flows¹⁰³. However, as I argued in chapter three, mistaking this homogenising characterization for *the* reality or meaning of ecosystems gives undue priority to discourse in the form of objectivistic or dualistic sediment. If we're to do justice to the irreducibly revelatory value of experience which Alcoff foregrounds, then some sort of onto-epistemological priority should be given to nondiscursive grounds of revealing, especially where one hopes to do justice to the world in *its* alterity. Moreover, if we're to problematize hegemony in our guiding view-from-everywhere, we must be also radically attentive to the different sorts of grounds as they contribute to our experiences. Failure to carry out this reflective task sufficiently radically was, after all, both the naturalists' and speculative realists' major error.

I should nevertheless emphasize that, in saying the above, I don't mean to imply a value dualism between discursive (bad) and nondiscursive (good) grounds of experience. I've already argued, following Heinämaa and Alcoff, that both operate only as *grounds* of experience and so one is never entirely free from the other at the level of full experiential expressions. Moreover, it's evidently *essential* to a well-informed view-from-everywhere that ecophenomenological analyses engage dialectically with natural and social sciences which, properly contextualised, operate at various levels of discursive abstraction from the nondiscursive phenomenological openings which are their soil. Furthermore, in some cases, it is the reflective lens of science that allows it to discern latent discursive sediment in our own phenomenologies. I'm thinking here about the research in non-equilibrium thermodynamics which is important to appreciate Bennett's significant de-centralization of agency. Similarly important breakthroughs are being made in '4E' cognitive science too; not least because 4E approaches don't so *obviously* adhere to objectivistic or representationalist schemas as stringently as classical cognitive science¹⁰⁴. Dialogue with these disciplines can, and must, inform a radically-reflective ecophenomenological praxis.

Our issue here is not the axiological status of (non-)discursive grounds as such, but rather how (non-)discursive grounds play a role in our own concretely-situated phenomenologies, and any abstractions subsequently licenced. We really do need to be able to recognise sediment to some degree *as sediment* if we're able to disrupt the dominance of a praxis of objectification, because mistaking sediment for a primordial mode of revelation is what

¹⁰³ See Barad (2006) for an in-depth exploration of the discursive (e.g. political, technological, militaristic) grounds of contemporary quantum physics.

¹⁰⁴ '4E' stands for 'embodied', 'embedded', 'extended', and 'enactive' approaches to cognitive science (see Gibson, 1979; Gallagher, 2005; or Clark, 2008, for instance). Although I have no space to discuss these dialectics in depth, I touch on one in this chapter (Ch.6.4.1.n109), and one in the next (Ch.7.1.1).

ultimately licences the colonial errors we see in Bacon, Descartes, Crutzen, Husserl, Harman, and others.

So, where does this leave us? We've seen that, whilst Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists aren't tied to the universal essentialism levelled at Husserl, they must nevertheless affirm the existence of nondiscursive grounds of experience. Our question now becomes the following: 'are Merleau-Pontians prone to mistake discursive grounds for nondiscursive grounds of experience in an imperialistic manner that they aren't sufficiently well-equipped to address?' If so, then the objections surveyed above might prove fatal for the potential of an ecophenomenological praxis that seeks to disrupt the colonial violence of our crisis situation through a radically-reflective habitus of critique.

6.3 (Non-)Discursive Grounds and the Body schema

Let's begin with some of the challenges that have been made to Merleau-Ponty's core account of the body schema. Iris Marion Young and Frantz Fanon have each sought to show that Merleau-Ponty's basic account of the 'anonymous' (i.e. nondiscursive) body schema betrays the historico-cultural sediment of Merleau-Ponty's own politically-privileged (white, male, 'Western') situation. If their charges hold, they speak against ecophenomenology's ability to engage with alterity in the radical manner I insist, because phenomenology would be shown to be prone to mistake the roles that (non-)discursive grounds play in even our most basic self-experience. Moreover, if successful, they also suggest that Merleau-Pontian phenomenology's inveterate androcentrism—let alone its anthropocentrism—makes it poorly situated to attend to this error. If their analyses prove problematic for Merleau-Pontian phenomenology's capacity to appreciate the alterity of even relatively similarly embodied beings (i.e. other humans), the problems Young and Fanon identify would also speak volumes against Merleau-Pontian *ecophenomenology's* capacity to make sense of a nonanthropocentric view-from-everywhere in which radically differently embodied entities are involved on their own terms. I shall begin with Young.

6.3.1 The Masculine Body

Whilst Oksala is right to claim that Merleau-Ponty doesn't ascribe foundational priority to any particular body schema, Young's objection revolves around Merleau-Ponty's claim that, regardless of the specific character it takes, the body schema is unified in all normal cases. Young draws from empirical research which suggests that women frequently live their bodies in a more fragmented sense than Merleau-Ponty allows, and that this fragmentation shows up in "feminine" (1989, p.54) gaits and throwing styles. To explain: for Merleau-Ponty the

synthesis of one's bodily abilities through the body schema empowers one to appropriate one's world. For Merleau-Ponty, one is always "in undivided possession" of one's body "through a body schema in which all [of its elements] are included" (*PP*, p.98, translation altered). Young notes that Merleau-Ponty's 'anonymous' body schema is thereby characterized as something nondiscursively lived through as "pure fluid action" (1989, p.59). The "ambiguous transcendence" (Young, 1989, p.58) typical of feminine motility, however, problematizes this contention.

Young argues that women live their bodies largely as burdens and, therefore, more significantly as objects (*Körper*) than men. This is because, Gail Weiss argues, women often differentially "mediate their own relationship with their bodies as they are seen by others" (1999, pp.46-7). In a misogynistic, sexist, or dualistic society, Sandra Bartky (1990) explains, the panoptical societal gaze is differentially present in women's lives in a manner that is psychologically oppressive for them. As a 'female' body-subject, one is officially afforded subject status. Yet, largely because of the dualistic sediment which imbues 'Western' society, she is constantly and forcibly reminded that she is an object by others in a manner that men, because of their political privilege, are spared. This might be in terms of her casual sexual objectification, the differential importance applied to her physical appearance or her reproductive capacities, and so on. These pervasive acts of objectification begin in childhood and ensure that "the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing" (Young, 1989, p.66), which causes a rupture within her relationship with her body that promotes the bodily disunity typical of feminine bodily comportment.

The aforementioned differential objectification also seems to have a direct bearing on the meanings that the world presents according to the modality of "inhibited intentionality" (1989, p.59). For Merleau-Ponty, as a body-subject, one's well-integrated body schema licences a fundamental "I can" which "opens [one] out upon the world and places [one] in a situation there" (*PP*, p.165). The manifestation of one's bodily capacities inherent to this "I can" operatively delineate the nondiscursive meanings that the world 'teaches' us. However, Young argues, in the case of feminine motility, by living one's body as a burden, one operatively or pre-reflectively underestimates one's bodily capacities. Worldly affordances are, therefore, more often perceived as those which, whilst "*one* can", as a situated *female* body, "I cannot" (1989, p.60). The expressive unity that Merleau-Ponty sets up as neutral between one's bodily capacities and worldly possibilities, therefore, misrepresents the "discontinuous unity" (1989, p.61) experienced under the 'feminine' model. Since, for the Merleau-Pontian phenomenologist, one's grasp of the world is intimately related to one's mode of bodily comportment within it, 'feminine' worlds must therefore be coloured significantly differently

to masculine ones in a manner unattended to under the ‘anonymous’ terms of Merleau-Ponty’s body schema.

Young’s overall objection is to the ahistorical, *abstract* character of the body schema which, as Merleau-Ponty mistakenly presents it, affords the nondiscursive grounds of experience we seek. Merleau-Ponty argues that “[i]n order that we may be able to move our body towards an object, the object must first exist for it, our body cannot belong to the realm of the ‘in-itself’” (*PP*, p.139), yet each of Young’s observations call this claim into question. Feminine bodily comportment, Young argues, is characterized by the fact that “for feminine existence the body frequently is both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act” (1989. p.61). This differs from masculine experience in that the feminine body is fragmented, and is *lived*, in part, as an object *just like any other*; something which, for the ‘normal’ body-subject, Merleau-Ponty thinks impossible. Thus, Young’s analysis suggests that the ‘nondiscursive’ grounds of experience licenced by the Merleau-Pontian body schema misrepresent their origins, because they reflect the androcentric phenomenology of the occupied centre. Furthermore, through Merleau-Ponty’s inability to recognise radically differential schemas (such as these ‘feminine’ ones), he shows a tendency to homogenise allegedly ‘nondiscursive’ grounds of experience in a manner that is incompatible with sufficient openness to alterity, even in the human case. Merleau-Ponty thus appears to be dangerously close to repeating Husserl’s error of onto-epistemological imposition.

6.3.2 The White Body

Fanon’s account of being a black body-subject in a racist society shares striking similarities with Young’s. Helpfully, however, Fanon relates his experience to the same master/slave dialectic that Merleau-Ponty sometimes invokes. Fanon takes up Hegel’s notion that “self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists in being acknowledged” (Hegel, 1977, p.111). The standard Kojévian interpretation of the dialectic holds that the intersubjective struggle for recognition is reciprocal and that, even in losing, one’s transcendence is recognised. However, in a colonial society, Fanon argues, the black person is dualistically *identified* with certain physical features. He is, thus, precluded from the reciprocal struggle because his appeals for recognition are ignored:

For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man... The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.

Fanon is primarily defined in the eyes of the white person (and subsequently, his own) by the colour of his skin. Thus, Fanon cannot significantly exercise his transcendence because he is “locked into his body” (2008, p.175): trapped in the way he appears through the gaze of the other. As Gibson puts it: “[d]riven back, as it were, into ‘race’, an ontology based on reciprocity is, by definition, sealed off” (2003, p.133). This explains why Fanon becomes an object in much the same way as the ‘feminine’ body-subject.

Jeremy Weate notes that since the above dialectic prevents his “free agency” and construction of a “self-image”, the black person cannot *construct* his own body schema; instead a “white *mythos* inserts itself between the black body and its self-image” (2001, p.7). Fanon thus describes sketching below his body schema a “historico-racial schema” (2008, p.84): the product of sedimented history as constructed by white people, in which he is trapped. Fanon describes “discovering [his] blackness” as being “battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism [sic], racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’” (2008, pp.84-85). Fanon’s body schema finally “crumbles” and is replaced by a “racial epidermal schema”, in which the historico-racial schema “becomes ‘naturalised’ as a *condition* of skin” (Fanon, 2008, p.84; Weate, 2001, p.10). This schema in turn ensures that, rather than being free to engage with the world with a primordial ‘I can’, the black person in a colonial society is instead laden by the ‘nauseating’ responsibility felt for ‘his’ “race” and “ancestors” (Fanon, 2008, p.84).

Fanon poses a problem for Merleau-Ponty because in Merleau-Ponty’s master-slave dialectic “the other’s gaze transforms me into an object, and mine him, only if both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking nature, if we both make ourselves into an inhuman gaze” (*PP*, p.361). This is because, Merleau-Ponty claims, as a matter of inescapable perceptual faith, one cannot help but experience domination as a fundamentally *embodied* relation. In episodes of violence—even in the violence of the gaze relationship itself—other human body-subjects always (nondiscursively) present themselves as suffering subjects in whom, *via our common embodiment*, I am partially implicated. Through my gaze, therefore, “the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behaviour in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity” (*PP*, p.354). However, on Fanon’s account, it is his body that *prevents* him being more than an object in a colonial society, just as Young might say that her body prevents her from resisting masculine objectification. Thus, the free and reciprocal body-world dialogue that Merleau-Ponty appears to think is spontaneously available to body-subjects in virtue of inhabiting a ‘nondiscursively’ unified body schema seems instead to be contingent on the modes of embodiment one’s socio-

historical situation licences. That is to say, possessing the sort of transcendence necessary to construct the ‘basic’ Merleau-Pontian body schema appears to be dependent on how the gaze is differentially administered within a socio-historically situated master-slave dialectic. As Weate puts it: “Fanon’s critique of phenomenology teaches us that the universal is the end of the struggle, not that which precedes it” (2001, p.17).

Fanon and Young’s criticisms suggest that, by misrepresenting the nature of the basic structures of embodied experience through the body schema, Merleau-Ponty inadvertently highlights grounds for concern about whether phenomenologists really *could* attend to “the first philosophical act”: to “restore to things their concrete physiognomy, to organisms their individual ways of dealing with the world, and to subjectivity its inherence in history” (*PP*, p.57). Needless to say, our worries on this score are magnified when we remember that we’re attempting to address the radical alterity of nonhuman entities, some of which can’t straightforwardly ‘gaze’ at all, and so appear to be at further risk of dualistic objectification. Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology’s nonanthropocentric credentials appear to be jeopardy.

6.3.3 An Obvious Response

It’s tempting to respond that Merleau-Ponty’s error is less grave than it appears. The proponent of this view might acknowledge that Young and Fanon expose an important weakness in Merleau-Pontian phenomenology’s capacity to identify experiential commonalities between body-subjects. However, the response might go, this admission does little to discredit the Merleau-Pontian phenomenologist’s ability to discern nondiscursive grounds of experience *as such*. Why? Because both Young and Fanon appear to be advancing, in Young’s words, a “handicapped” (1989, p.65) schema. Young’s ‘feminine’ body schema appears to have been damaged by the patriarchal gaze. For his part, Fanon claims that “[a]s long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others” (2008, p.82). In both cases, it seems, had they not been subject to dualistic objectification contingent upon their socio-historical situations, they would each have retained the same basic, unified body schema that Merleau-Ponty insists upon.

However, we should have little time for this response. There are manifold reasons, but the most important are that it’s both *false* and politically *dangerous* to normalize the body schema in this manner. On the first count, Richard Shusterman accuses Merleau-Ponty of effectively advancing a

misleading binary contrast... [between] ‘normal’ people whose somatic sense and functioning is totally smooth, spontaneous, and unproblematic... [and] the abnormally incapacitated:

patients such as Schneider who exhibit pathological dysfunction and are usually suffering from serious neurological injury (such as brain lesions) or grave psychological trauma.

(2005, p.166)

Almost all of us surely live *between* these binaries, yet “Merleau-Ponty implies that if we are not pathologically impaired like Schneider and other neurologically diseased individuals, then our unreflective body sense is fully accurate and miraculously functional” (2005, p.166). Schusterman uses trivial examples, such as the common mistake about the position of one’s head which prevents an effective golf swing, to show this to be straightforwardly false. Likewise, Grimshaw (1999, p.107) draws upon the inhibited movements of male colleagues in aerobics classes to argue that the ideal of the ‘basic’ Merleau-Pontian body schema simply isn’t realised, even by affluent white men in patriarchal societies. Moreover, where these body-subjects *do* get close to spontaneously maximizing their capacities in the requisite sense, Grimshaw argues, is invariably in arenas discursively coded ‘male’, such as team sports. Since the relative inhibition of transcendence experienced by body-subjects seems to be non-accidentally related to their differential immersion in the discursive coding of those arenas (e.g. women in aerobics versus men in team sports), this strongly suggests that any such schematic norms are acquired, rather than primordial.

What’s more problematic for the Merleau-Pontian *ecophenomenologist*, however, is Grimshaw’s assessment of the *dangerous normative role* that Merleau-Ponty’s stipulations about the body schema play. Grimshaw notes that Merleau-Ponty’s ‘normal’ body schema is principally defined by its lack of inhibition. Inhibition in the body schema, according to the proponent of the ‘obvious response’, is the product of dualistic discourse that draws undue attention to one’s object-body. Following the sociologist R.W. Connell, however, Grimshaw (1999, p.107) argues that this characteristic lack of inhibition mirrors the *oppressive* impetus to maximise space that is culturally-coded as masculine; an expansionist drive which is discursively grounded and, more importantly, always inhibiting for Others in a manner that (because of its privileged status within dualistic societies) we aren’t well-positioned to recognise. Grimshaw qualifies her claim with reference to the commonalities between the ‘masculine’ obsession with noisy and powerful vehicles and an intrusive ‘masculine’ gait or choice of leg position when seated. But it is exactly this sort of ‘masculine’ drive we explored at length in our opening chapters, and which we diagnosed as an important facet of our unreflective commodification and appropriation of the more-than-human world. This sort of drive appears to be complicit in the reckless consumerism that Bennett seeks to challenge by drawing attention to nonhuman (quasi-)agency, for instance. Moreover, the uninhibited intentionality that Grimshaw problematizes is one that is particularly poorly positioned to

hesitate in the requisite manner to disrupt the uncritically utilitarian or objectivistic praxis which Kohák equates with ‘urban experience’.

If, as Shusterman, Grimshaw, Young, and Fanon each contend, the ‘nondiscursive’ boundaries of Merleau-Ponty’s body schema reflect a misleading ideal of bodily communion with the world which betrays the sediment of a constructed ‘master’ position, then Merleau-Ponty’s nonanthropocentric and nonandrocentric credentials are in serious trouble. This is because the allegedly nondiscursive grounds of experience manifested through Merleau-Ponty’s body schema are not only more significantly discursive than they appear, some of the discursive sediment thought to be fundamental to that body schema appears to be intimately related to our propensities towards colonial violence. In support of this claim, we saw in chapter four how Merleau-Ponty himself links lack of inhibition to colonial habits. For Merleau-Ponty, recall, this is because when one’s tools work well—when one’s appropriation of worldly things is largely unimpeded, such as when men are not primed to focus on their ‘objective’ bodily limitations—there exist insufficient moments of friction or denial (what Al-Saji calls ‘inassimilable events’) to promote critical self-reflexivity either to sediment, or the ways we appropriate the world to *our* goals. This sort of thought was behind our recommendation of the virtues of attention and hesitation (as well as Kohák’s less convincing imperative to ‘take to the woods’) in chapter four. By conceiving the body schema as he does, Merleau-Ponty appears to actively *limit* critical self-reflexivity as a matter of *praxis*.

Let’s recap. We now have good reason to think that Merleau-Ponty misidentifies the relative grounds of experience licenced by the ‘basic’ body schema. More importantly, the grounds he misidentifies as fundamentally nondiscursive seem to result largely from dualistic discourse and are, therefore, hostile to uncovering this sort of colonial sediment as part of a praxis that resists anthropocentric mastery. Since one key value of Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology lies in its ability to expose such sediment and subsequently contribute to a more positive view-from-everywhere, our admission here is a serious blow. Moreover, since (as Alcoff argues) nondiscursive grounds may only show themselves in experience, yet (as Young, Fanon, and Grimshaw show) Merleau-Ponty is prone to mistake dualistic sediment for nondiscursive grounds, our admission seems to be problematic for a Merleau-Pontian praxis of suitably radical reflection. After all, such a praxis can only really get off the ground in the requisite manner when guided by inassimilable events. If Merleau-Pontian (eco-)phenomenology’s inherent androcentrism makes it prone to mischaracterize discursive sediment as the nondiscursive, however, it’s unclear that it may retain sufficient openness to those inassimilable events in the first place. Thus, it would seem, even Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is ultimately prone to result in the sort of *de facto* correlationism which is

positively hostile to its goals. Understood as such, it's not clear that an ecophenomenological rethinking of forest ecosystems, deforestation, or anthropogenic climate change would constitute an improvement on the models natural scientists already offer of these things, regardless of the broader range of meaningful phenomena that are amenable to a phenomenological ontology.

6.4 The Dialectical Interpretation

To be sure, these are important objections, but I don't think that the Merleau-Pontian project is yet doomed because the preceding analyses neglect some of the important tools Merleau-Ponty bequeaths us. To utilise these tools, however, I think our first move must be to bite the bullet and accept that Merleau-Ponty does indeed distort the nondiscursive character of the body schema by presenting it as he does. But this move needn't make Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology either false or incompatible with our purposes. Firstly, this is because Merleau-Ponty's own androcentric delimitation of the body schema is inessential to his broader (and more plausible) account of embodied perception. The important ecophenomenological insights I've drawn from Merleau-Ponty all revolve around the principle that, since one is always concretely situated, one's differential embodiment contributes in significant, if often clandestine ways to the intentional meanings that the world affords to one's 'grasp'. Even in jettisoning Merleau-Ponty's 'masculine' schema this principle remains untouched; it is actually structurally essential to Young and Fanon's objections. Abandoning some of the specifics of Merleau-Ponty's own account also doesn't necessarily entail a problematic radical antifoundationalism either. As I noted above, there is no in-principle reason why *other* accounts of the body schema (or body schemas) couldn't do justice to common nondiscursive grounds of experience in the requisite manner without retaining problematically colonial or expansionist drives at their core.

Our next step is to address what, at a metatheoretical level, is going on when Merleau-Ponty proposes his mistaken account of the body schema in the first place. To do this, we must address some tensions. Our present objection revolves around the claim that phenomenology is tied to a sort of *de facto* correlationism under which one cannot adequately transcend the discursive limits of one's experience to arbitrate which grounds go beyond that discursive sediment. This is, of course, an objection to which Merleau-Ponty wouldn't be entirely adverse. He disavows 'high-altitude thought' and thinks that, because of our carnal embeddedness, the Gestalt always provides a descriptive limit to our own phenomenologies. Furthermore, as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, since one's Gestalt is *always* inflected by the sediment of one's situation, this is one reason why a full transcendental reduction is incompletionable. But if so, then it appears methodologically *impossible* for Merleau-Ponty to

undertake the task our critic ascribes to him; it would require a project of transcendence of exactly the ilk Merleau-Ponty speaks against. This *can't* be his project, and Merleau-Ponty tells us as much:

A philosophy becomes transcendental, or radical, not by taking its place in absolute consciousness, without mentioning the ways by which this is reached, but by considering itself a problem; not by postulating a knowledge rendered totally explicit, but by recognising as the fundamental philosophic problem this *presumption* on reason's part.

(PP, p.63)

Our critic's objection appears to be predicated on the same common misreading of the Merleau-Pontian project which underpins Shannon Sullivan's contention that Merleau-Ponty thinks that embodiment provides a "shortcut" (1997, p.8) to the Other. On Sullivan's reading, embodiment somehow provides privileged access to common 'anonymous' structures of experience—transcendentally stripped of the particularities of one's situation—which one may reflectively uncover. By beginning from the assumption of harmony or unity between parties, Sullivan claims, Merleau-Pontian phenomenology is inherently hostile to alterity because any intersubjective "dialogue" is effectively reduced to "a solipsistic subject's monologue that includes an elimination of others in its very 'communication' with them" (1997, p.1). Ultimately, Sullivan thinks, the Merleau-Pontian phenomenologist is apt to mistake *one's embodied situation* for *the situation of being embodied* in a politically colonial manner. On Sullivan's reading, embodiment affords the same 'unproblematic' shortcut to the Other here that transcendental consciousness provides in Husserl and hence Merleau-Ponty repeats Husserl's colonial error. For Sullivan, Merleau-Ponty provides another example where, by implicitly privileging one's own mode of revealing, one appropriates the Other's unfamiliarity and therefore collapses their alterity.

However, as Kruks (2006, p.37) clarifies, Merleau-Ponty *never* claims that one's body provides a shortcut to the other party. Embodiment is, for Merleau-Ponty, only the "medium of our communication" (PP, p.181); it is only the source of the *possibility* of a common world in which a dialectic might take place. And, lest we forget, for Merleau-Ponty, philosophy must be *hyper*-dialectical, because 'Hegel is the museum'. We saw in chapter four, for instance how, for the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist, *sustaining* a radically-reflective hyper-dialectic between body-subject and world is essential to a praxis which resists appropriating that world under problematically objectivistic, utilitarian, or dualistic terms. This is because one must remain affectively open to the surprising meanings that the world throws up (e.g. that trees may communicate, that rubbish may retain a certain sort of agency, that objective

thought isn't ontologically basic, or that the remit of positivistic science needn't exhaust ontological reality) and attend to them in turn. For Merleau-Ponty, "the core of philosophy", therefore, "lies in the perpetual beginning of reflection" (*PP*, p.62).

Of course, for Merleau-Ponty, one's embodiment provides the necessary connaturality with the world for any genuine dialectic to get off the ground. Without it, as Meillassoux claims, one really would be trapped in a (species) solipsistic perspective *on* the world. However—and Kruks would think that failing to recognise this is the source of Sullivan's error—dialectical relationships are always both sustaining *and* denying. "The dialectic", Merleau-Ponty tells us, "is not a relationship between contradictory and inseparable thoughts; it is the tending of an existence towards another existence which denies it, and yet, without which it is not sustained" (*PP*, pp.167-8). If dialectics between body-subject and world were merely sustaining there would be no need for radical reflection to be a perpetual beginning; the world would simply present its meanings to the suitably engaged individual. As we've seen Merleau-Ponty repeatedly argue, however, this sort of thinking reflects a lack of attention to one's situated and embodied historicity, and the inexhaustible alterity that the world retains. It affords only the sort of 'closed' dialectic that typifies scientific naturalism and which we disavowed with Haraway in chapter three.

Merleau-Ponty recognises that the world may dialectically *deny* us in several productive ways that, if we're disposed to address it *in its alterity*, we must be open to. We've already seen some of these: it may fail to satisfy our embodied expectations (as in the case of the shipwreck or Bennett's rubbish), it may shatter our present grasp by presenting us with inassimilable events (as occurred through Bennett's revelations on nonsubjective agency), or the world may withdraw from our grasp and retain a radical excess. This happens when one realises that, as only a situated 'style' of embodiment amongst others, one cannot exhaust the meanings that the more-than-human world may offer without collapsing the very alterity that, at least on my reading, radical reflection intends to do justice to.

Since for Merleau-Ponty, Kruks (2006, p.35) notes, "there is no rupture between our being in the natural world and our being in the social world, we might expect similar tensions also to inform our relations with other people". In fact, Kruks (1981, 2006) argues, the entire of Merleau-Ponty's political *oeuvre* (and his venture into Marxism in particular) is characterized by commitment to an intersubjective dialectic which is governed by affirmation *and* denial relations¹⁰⁵. Merleau-Ponty's guiding political question is "*whether* communication might be possible in a world of endemic conflict" and, more specifically, whether this communication

¹⁰⁵ Kruks (1981) notes that Merleau-Ponty sees the young Marx as a hyper-dialectical thinker.

might *begin* through “embodied intersubjectivity” (Kruks, 2006, p.39). However—and we’ve seen this thought substantiated in Fanon’s account—Merleau-Ponty thinks that embodiment is no shortcut to harmony. Kruks reads the thrust of Merleau-Ponty’s political theory as follows: that *if* we seek to establish more positive dialectical relationships with human Others *then* these must be built upon the grounds that our embodiment affords to access a common world¹⁰⁶.

This, I think, is the essential point we should take from Kruks: embodiment provides only the possibility of a ground on which *we* may *build* a more positive dialectic. Just as in the case of dialectics between body-subject and world, because each party is differently situated, one cannot entirely accurately or reliably prejudge which aspects of the intersubjective dialectic will be affirmed, and which will be denied, by the Other, in advance of participating in the dialectic. In terms of intersubjective experience, one might have some affective awareness of something like how (as an *alter ego*) the Other’s might pain feel, or the quasi-familial relationship she might share with a specific area of land, for example, but given one’s situation, one cannot know how the world (or even a specific pain) *is* for the Other. Believing that one could was the source of Husserl’s major error. Moreover, given the diacritical intertwining of discursive and nondiscursive grounds in our experiences, nor can one know that the Other takes up the same putatively nondiscursive grounds at all in advance of the dialectic. There are many reasons for this, but we’ve already seen the most important one: since one’s being is always being-in-the-world, one cannot entirely transcend or dehistoricize one’s phenomenological experience, nor can one, therefore, unproblematically desituate or universalise any theoretical pronouncements derived from it. This tension between being concretely situated in a socio-historical lifeworld and the demand for the sort of radical reflection that brings our intentional commitments into view is what Merleau-Ponty calls “the paradox of immanence and transcendence” (*PrP*, p.26). In fact, the problem that this paradox unveils exposes the kernel of truth in Sullivan’s objection: *should* one take one’s embodiment to provide a transcendental shortcut to the Other’s alterity, one *will* become closed off to the legitimate possibility of denial essential to a rigorous dialectic. Rather, what one needs to do is participate in the intersubjective hyper-dialectic in earnest. This, I think, is what Merleau-Ponty is doing when he makes his *provisional* claims about ‘anonymous’ experience.

Taking these insights into account, the interpretation I propose holds that descriptions of the ‘anonymous’ body schema in the *Phenomenology* are ultimately part of a metatheoretical

¹⁰⁶ Kruks would think that Fanon misunderstands the master/slave dialectic that he participates in. As embodied, the master *must* recognise the slave to some degree as an *alter ego*. Nevertheless, in cases like Fanon’s, the master responds to this inassimilable event in a familiarly pathological manner by objectifying the slave.

hyper-*dialectical* project, rather than a foundationalist or radically antifoundationalist one. Merleau-Ponty is seeking to reflect on his own somewhat ambiguously presented experience to uncover shared knowledge about the body as it presents its structure ('anonymously') in perception, rather than either articulating *the* universal account on which all perception is built, or one in which all perception is culturally constituted. The dialectical method promotes a process of open, critical, intersubjective dialogue between radically-reflective body-subjects through which we perpetually propose, resituate and modify descriptive accounts of what we believe to be common nondiscursive grounds of embodied experience. Intersubjective hyper-dialectic at the metatheoretical level simply mirrors the progressive hyper-dialectic employed in radical reflection at the theoretical level. The 'webs of connections' thereby uncovered afford us a common, but unexhausted, *real* world beyond mere cultural construction.

Since transcendental reduction has shown itself to be incompletable, the dialectical method seems to be the only way to establish progressive access to both ourselves and a common world in a sense that manages to take seriously that (as Alcoff has shown) experience seems to contain within it something of the common (or, perhaps, near universal) through its nondiscursive grounds. This interpretation helps us to make sense of the apparent contradictions in which Merleau-Ponty seems to describe the foundational structure of everybody yet, often on the same page, argues that one cannot reflectively transcend one's concrete situation. Once we understand that Merleau-Ponty is describing elements of embodied experience that he has reason to think may have common nondiscursive grounds, the apparent contradictions are dissolved. I propose that this was Merleau-Ponty's metatheoretical project all along. Thinking otherwise, to reiterate, would be to ignore the central paradox of immanence and transcendence and, implausibly, put Merleau-Pontian phenomenology (at least at a metatheoretical level) into Hegel's museum.

This interpretation also explains why Merleau-Ponty's 'anonymous' body is, at times, evidently white, 'masculine', and so on. Given his own warnings about the implausibility of completing any transcendental reduction, many proposed 'commonalities' are bound to reflect historico-cultural sediment more than nondiscursive grounds. Of course, it *is* true to say that Merleau-Ponty was wrong about the nondiscursive universality of certain 'anonymous' structures of embodied perception. However, it is more accurate to say that his claims were mistaken but, metatheoretically speaking, Merleau-Ponty was engaged in an intersubjective hyper-dialectic in which such suggesting, rejecting and modifying such suggestions in open dialogue with Others is an essential part of uncovering the nondiscursive grounds of a common experiential world, *without thereby doing undue violence to alterity*.

6.4.1 Going Beyond Kruks

Kruks' dialectical interpretation is useful to make sense of what is going on with Merleau-Ponty's claims about the body schema, but how does it relate to our ecophenomenological project specifically? We should be reminded that we've been addressing the objection that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is implicated in a sort of androcentric correlationism. A radically-reflective ecophenomenology requires one to be able to identify the respective roles discursive and nondiscursive grounds play in our situated experiences, however, because of its insistence on the irreducibly revelatory role of experience, ecophenomenology allegedly denies itself the necessary tools to carry out this analysis. Thus, ecophenomenology's 'solipsism' makes it prone to impose unhelpful discursive grounds on more-than-human Others as nondiscursively basic.

What Kruks' analysis helps us to see is that the charge of solipsism is, yet again, misplaced because it involves a misconception of phenomenology as a solitary transcendental endeavour. By mischaracterizing Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology in this way, our critic doesn't address the possibility that intersubjective hyper-dialectic might provide further plausible means of progressively uncovering the requisite (non-)discursive grounds of experience that we seek. By widening the scope of the hyper-dialectic to encompass the view of philosophy *itself* as an intersubjective hyper-dialectic, Merleau-Ponty affords a more realistic opportunity for critical self-reflexivity about the roles that different types of grounds play in our experiences and the meaningful phenomena that they reveal. Moreover, in doing so, Merleau-Ponty needn't abandon the radical situation of perspective that is so important to his characterization of philosophy as radically-reflective, but also embodied *and* historically-situated. In fact, Young, Fanon, Schusterman, and Grimshaw all inadvertently help to illustrate Kruks' point. By engaging with Merleau-Ponty's body schema and, thus, participating in the dialectical process, each of them helped to facilitate real progress in uncovering discursive grounds of experience that were left unidentified in Merleau-Ponty's own work¹⁰⁷. But this shouldn't be entirely surprising. If, as we saw Heinämaa argue in chapter two, intersubjective assent relations are an essential facet of one's grasp of the world, our dialectical relationships in 'the social world' will *always* play a key role in the establishment of the real.

But Kruks' dialectical interpretation offers us more than a relief from solipsism. It affords further *targeted*, intersubjective means of ensuring affective openness to our social and

¹⁰⁷ Even Irigaray—that radical opponent of Merleau-Ponty's—appears to be engaged in the same hyper-dialectic. As Fischer (2007, p.208-9) notes, Irigaray (e.g. 1996) requires a common "mucosity" to sustain intersubjective relations between sexuate beings and, like Merleau-Ponty, focuses on the role of dialectical denial relations (what Irigaray calls the 'negative') in holding open the requisite space for recognition of alterity.

material dependencies that build upon, and go beyond, Al-Saji's recommendation to habitually hesitate. Kruks, therefore, affords further non-solipsistic means to address the problematically androcentric, dualistic, and objectivistic commitments and assumptions that undermine our attempts to engage with(in) the world more positively. To illustrate: note that part of the reason why Fanon and Young's interjections are so revealing is that their phenomenological perspectives reflect their experiences as members of socio-politically deprived groups. That is not to say that, in virtue of certain bodily specificities, they are 'closer to nature' than Merleau-Ponty and, therefore, more in-tune with the nondiscursive contours of the meanings that the world licences. This sort of essentialist claim would surely reflect the sort of dualistic sediment that we're aiming to address. Nor, especially given their complex identities of privilege and oppression, are Young and Fanon's phenomenological perspectives epistemically innocent¹⁰⁸. We should heed Scott's warnings about treating them as such. However—and this, I think, is the key legacy of feminist standpoint epistemology—what Young and Fanon's situations place them well to do is to identify and problematize *certain* discursive (i.e. unhelpfully dualistic or otherwise androcentric) grounds at play in experience that those in more privileged situations are less well-attuned to recognise. In Young and Grimshaw's cases, for instance, the 'feminine' body-subject's inability to address the world with 'pure fluid action' results in an inassimilable event. It draws her attention to the fact that she doesn't live according to an uninterrupted modality of the 'I can'. Young and Grimshaw also thereby allow *us* to recognise that neither is this 'I can' nondiscursively available to all 'normal' body-subjects. Moreover, given that this way of relating to the world appears to be intimately related to its place in a problematically androcentric schema, nor should we wish it to be.

Given the multiplicity of situations and schemas taken up by body-subjects—all of whom share ontological crossover with the rest of the world—we have reason, therefore, to be optimistic about the potential for *nonandrocentrism* in ecophenomenology that arises from genuine participation in an intersubjective hyper-dialectic. To reprise Alcoff's contention from the end of chapter four, this is primarily because participation in the hyper-dialectic affords further openness to the sort of inassimilable events that disrupt our habitual objectification or androcentric projectivism and may help us, instead, to inculcate a radical habitus of critique.

Understanding theory to progress in the social manner Kruks suggests would also help us to make sense of why Merleau-Ponty himself sees the inherent tension between immanence

¹⁰⁸ Young and Fanon enjoy the privileges of being 'middle-class' and human, for instance.

and transcendence as a “fruitful” or “fecund contradiction” (*PrP*, p.26)¹⁰⁹. There is some truth to Butler’s claim that the attempt to reconcile an abstract subject with a concrete situation as-lived is phenomenology’s “impossible project” (1989, p.95). For Merleau-Ponty, however, this impossibility doesn’t demonstrate the futility of phenomenology. Rather, the impossibility of any wholly transcendental reflection makes philosophical progress somewhat dependent on a stance of positive openness to Others and their capacity to deny us. It is, as Reynolds notes, only the ostensible failure of one’s attempt to overcome the paradox of immanence and transcendence that truly “wakens us to wonder” (2016, p.85). Thus, through her recognition of this paradox, the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist appears to be *better* positioned to engage in the project of critical self-reflexivity about her own acts of onto-epistemological imposition, which, I have argued, is necessary for a more positive human-world praxis. Fischer argues for instance that, unlike those who adopt the “pathologically detached” stance often taken up in factory farming or sweatshop labour, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists are thereby able to do justice to alterity because an intrinsically dialectical philosophy requires

¹⁰⁹ Given the nature of the charge addressed in this chapter, I’ve focused on alternative phenomenologies and the possibility of one’s openness to them. However, as Reynolds (2016) argues, we also see ‘fecund contradictions’ in interdisciplinary dialectics. One fruitful dialectic is found between Merleau-Ponty and James Gibson’s (1966; 1979) work in cognitive science. We’ve seen that Merleau-Ponty used Gestalt psychology’s findings to challenge the phenomenological givenness of Husserl’s transcendental essences. Gibson informed the phenomenological debate by exposing dated assumptions about the reductive presumptions of all alternative sensory psychologies. Although Gibson sees his work as a continuation of Merleau-Ponty’s, Gibson’s environmental approach might nevertheless concede too much to the objectivistic remit of classical cognitive science through its homogenizing appeal to affordances. To explain: by ‘affordances’ Gibson refers to the possibilities that an environment provides for an organism relative to its functional orientation, intentions, and so on. Gibson’s affordances are inherently relational and, therefore, cannot be described in atomistic terms without significant distortion. Nonetheless, Gibson takes affordances to be independent of any given animal’s ability to recognise them as such, even at an operative level. As cognitive scientists, Gibson appears to think, *we* may identify *the* affordances, even if the earthworm misses them. Thus, not unlike Odling-Smee in chapter four, Gibson ends up naturalizing the phenomena somewhat specific to a certain type of Gestalt—in Gibson’s case, the affordances ‘objectively’ available for detection—from an apparently transcendent standpoint. Gibson thereby demonstrates a problematic hostility to nonhuman alterity. Meacham notes that a similar anthropocentrism pervades the bioactivist literature that Gibson’s research spawned, since “many of its operative concepts seem to be drawn, at least initially, from philosophy of mind and human phenomenology and then scaled down to less complex systems” (Meacham, 2016, p.75). Merleau-Pontians, however, are better disposed to attend to this issue because “Merleau-Ponty, cognizant of his own Umwelt-situatedness maintains that any access to this virtuality, what he calls brute or wild being, must be through perception” (Meacham, 2016, p.92).

Reynolds takes dialectics like the above to show Merleau-Ponty to be a weak methodological naturalist (i.e. to hold “that philosophical results ought to be broadly continuous with those of the sciences” (Reynolds, 2016, p.83)). I deny this claim for two reasons. Firstly, because Merleau-Ponty (rightly) affords a certain primacy to phenomenology over the scientific revelations which derive from it. Weak methodological naturalists more-or-less affirm the inverse relation. Secondly, because, as Reynolds himself notes, weak methodological naturalism ultimately attempts to *eliminate* interdisciplinary contradictions between findings (2016, p.102). I’ve argued throughout this thesis that sustaining the sort of contradictions which are viewed with suspicion by naturalists (e.g. via a view-from-everywhere) may be important if we’re to be open to more-than-human alterity. My interpretation coheres better with Heinämaa’s than Reynolds’.

a *general shift* in the way we understand ourselves and live our lives with others, rather than [calling] for an ahistorical set of maxims. It is not just a matter of simply recognising *that* there is another, with a view different from my own. Rather, ethical recognition is a *mode* of being with another; it *demand*s that the other be listened to as *another* possible perspective while still attempting to maintain the goal of genuine reciprocity... [T]here is an obligation, a pact to keep the communicative process *alive*.

(Fischer, 2007, p.210)

This shift in *praxis*, Fischer argues, makes ecophenomenology particularly well-suited to take seriously Irigaray's thought that "I am not everything" (1996, pp.51-2); a contention which, if true, bolsters the Merleau-Pontian's nonanthropocentric or anti-imperialistic credentials. To reiterate: this is because Merleau-Ponty bequeaths us the tools for a hyper-dialectic which is founded on the nondiscursive grounds afforded by our common carnality, but one in which, given the concrete situation of our embodiment, *we're always especially attuned to the possibility of denial*.

Of course, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that the reason that we're aiming to uncover (non-)discursive grounds of experience is ultimately to inform a view-from-everywhere which encompasses *more-than-human* perspectives. Although, as we've seen, they're far from unrelated, refuting the charges of solipsism and androcentrism won't, therefore, go all the way to securing Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology's nonanthropocentric credentials. Simply put: one is still subject to the paradox of immanence and transcendence, yet one cannot engage in the *same* intersubjective dialectic with the more-than-human world that one can with human body-subjects. I have much more to say about this in the next chapter, but by way of pre-empting my conclusion, I contend that the attempt to do so is actually detrimental to the stance of critical self-reflexivity which is one of the key tools that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology offers in our quest to resist the imposition of ontological and epistemological violence.

Even putting this contention aside, however, the fact that intersubjective dialectic doesn't *straightforwardly* extend to all more-than-human entities needn't reinstate the issue of species solipsism for several important reasons. As I've argued at length, taking seriously the alterity of the more-than-human Others to whom these perspectives belong means accepting that, as differentially situated bodies, some of their meanings cannot be made available to me. They may simply be denied to me as part of the world's excess. But this isn't the whole story. In the previous chapter, I also argued that, given one's embodiment, one is at least partially implicated (and perhaps moreso if our bodies are structurally similar) *in* some of those

perspectives to make *some* well-justified (if always fallible and provisional) claims about the nondiscursive meanings available there. What Kruks' dialectical interpretation affords, then, are important intersubjective means of promoting critical self-reflexivity about one's violent imposition of discursive grounds (or narrowly anthropocentric, or group solipsistic nondiscursive grounds) onto other perspectives—including nonhuman ones—as if primordial, neutral, or universal. In short: Kruks provides non-solipsistic means of engaging productively and progressively with the more-than-human world that take seriously its capacity to affirm and deny us. Furthermore, we've seen reason to believe that the stance of openness and humility thereby encouraged is set against acts of colonial imposition from the outset, even when the Other's perspective may show up in the view-from-everywhere only as an excess.

6.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, we've explored the concern that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is poorly equipped to address the more-than-human world on its own terms because it is in some sense both solipsistic and androcentric. More specifically, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists stood accused of mischaracterizing the sediment of 'masculine' discourse for the world's nondiscursive meanings, and doing so in a manner that their philosophies are not adequately equipped to address. Although I argued that the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenological project *does* require an appeal to nondiscursive grounds of experience, by no means does this implicate Merleau-Pontians in the project of onto-epistemological imperialism that might be more satisfactorily attributed to Husserl. Instead, I argued that Merleau-Ponty should be understood to be advancing a metatheoretical hyper-dialectic which takes seriously the limitations of his situated embodiment and which, because of its intrinsic focus on intersubjective openness to dialectical denial, is set definitively *against* the sort of solipsistic imposition of violence with which Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology is charged. Conceived as such, Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology retains its capacity to address more-than-human entities in their alterity and, thus, retains an important role in addressing the submerged mass of our environmental crises.

Chapter 7: Radical Reflection, Reversibility, and the Flesh

Throughout this thesis, I've defended the claim that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology has a key role to play in addressing the submerged mass of assumptions and commitments which precipitate the environmental crisis. This is primarily because an engaged ecophenomenological praxis may bring our tendencies towards onto-epistemological violence into focus as a matter of habit. I've also argued that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology provides some useful critical tools to make us significantly better attuned to the meanings that the more-than-human world may licence. In the previous chapter, I argued that one of these comes through the ecophenomenologist's recourse to an intersubjective hyper-dialectic. The reason why an ecophenomenological praxis requires intersubjective dialogue is because, given one's concrete situation, one will likely retain problematic blind spots about one's intentional commitments, even in acts of radical reflection. I argued in the previous chapter that, without the possibility of intersubjective correction—and the corresponding stance of humility encouraged by acknowledging the limits of phenomenological transcendence—the claim that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists are trapped in a sort of *de facto* androcentric correlationism would carry significant weight.

Nevertheless, the following problem emerges: whilst an intersubjective dialectic may be useful in addressing problematically androcentric or andromorphic accounts of embodied *human* experience (e.g. by interrogating the nondiscursive limits of the body schema), *this* dialectic is carried out exclusively by human body-subjects and so any hyper-dialectical interjections aren't directly subject to correction by the very nonhuman entities whose meanings and perspectives we seek to accommodate in our view-from-*everywhere*. When I glossed this issue in the previous chapter, I suggested that our worry can be mitigated by the fact that the Merleau-Pontian body-subject is always partially implicated in the more-than-human world through their carnality. It's therefore erroneous to think that humans are bifurcated from the rest of the world in such a manner that dialectical engagement with it becomes, strictly speaking, impossible. Under the Merleau-Pontian model, even human Others are ontologically connatural with extra-human entities in the requisite manner to afford (varying degrees of) implication *in* their perspectives; perspectives which may, therefore, be to some degree clarified intersubjectively, as I suggested in the previous chapter.

Whilst one might accept my claims about the chiasmic intertwinings between human and nonhuman perspectives, however, one might think that the related issue then arises: whilst one

might be partially implicated in the perspective of a given nonhuman entity with which one is connatural, one might be misled about the meaningful content of that perspective in a manner that nonhuman entity cannot *itself* correct. To illustrate: I criticised Plumwood in chapter three for anthropomorphically misrepresenting the perspective of a snake on her porch, however, the snake cannot itself straightforwardly confirm or disconfirm my suspicions in the same way that Fanon or Young may. Participation in the intersubjective hyper-dialectic simply isn't open to nonhumans in the *same* manner as it is to humans. Thus, one might think that, because of the inherent asymmetry of human-world dialectics, the issues of androcentrism and andromorphism don't parallel the issues of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism sufficiently closely for an ecophenomenological praxis to do the work I ask of it.

In this chapter, I address Merleau-Ponty's later turn to the ontology of 'the flesh', unpacked in *The Visible and the Invisible*, through which the mature Merleau-Ponty thinks—as do many of his contemporary ecophenomenological acolytes—one may address this sort of issue¹¹⁰. Turning to the flesh might provide a solution to our problem because, through the sort of radically flattened ontology it implies, one may dialectically engage with the world's *own* latent intentionality at every turn. Since, according to the later Merleau-Ponty, all phenomenological openings are secondary abstractions from a primary ontological unity—a common flesh—from which *all* intentional meanings are derived, we're afforded the possibility of being able to interrogate and subsequently express “what in its silence [the world] *means to say*” (VI, p.39). The flesh thereby allegedly affords a site through which we might appreciate not only how the world is for ostensibly discrete human subjects, but the way things really are for the world itself.

But there is a serious problem with this picture. Central to Merleau-Ponty's later ontology is his claim that the hyper-dialectical movement between one's (reflective) articulation and the world's own silent *logos* constitutes expressive truth. Whilst these poles cannot coincide, their dissonance allegedly constitutes a “good error” (VI, p.125) which permits the movement constitutive of expressive truth because both poles are enveloped in the same flesh. However, even under his later model, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the requirement for “radical” or “*hyper-reflection*” (VI, p.38) to weed out reflective distortions and unwarranted sediment from one's (always concretely situated) account of things. The need for critical reflection suggests that the movement is subject to success conditions, according to which an expression may fall short. To distinguish true reflections on the more-than-human world from misleading ones—and, indeed, to establish the truth of any underpinning fundamental ontology—it seems that Merleau-Ponty must appeal to some measurement of the distance between that reflection and

¹¹⁰ See Abram (1996a), or Toadvine (2009).

the pre-reflective sense on which it draws; a measurement that—whilst essential to improved claims about what the world ‘means to say’—is, given the necessary interdependence of *logos* and articulation to express truth, rendered impossible by Merleau-Ponty’s own lights.

I argue, therefore, that we should be cautious about embracing the flesh ontology and making the sort of claims that the flesh apparently licences about the world’s intentions. More specifically, I contend that not only does Merleau-Ponty’s later ontological shift fail to provide any substantial improvement on the position advanced in *Phenomenology of Perception*, by re-situating the motor of expression in what is purportedly the world’s ‘own’ intentionality, Merleau-Ponty’s appeals to the flesh promote a shift in focus *away* from the very critical self-reflexivity that is pivotal in any ecophenomenological attempt to disrupt the violence of our submerged mass.

7.1 The Flesh

To substantiate the above claims, we must first understand both what is meant by ‘the flesh’ and the reasons that motivated Merleau-Ponty’s turn to it¹¹¹. Like Toadvine (2009), Bernet (1993), Priest (2002), and Barbaras (2004), I understand Merleau-Ponty to be consistently engaged in one overall project: namely, dismantling the distorting conceptual binarisms (e.g. subject/object or mind/body) that threaten genuine philosophical analysis. In earlier works, as we’ve seen, Merleau-Ponty advocated a return to one’s phenomenological experience—which problematizes such binarisms—as the necessary ground of philosophy. However, by allegedly beginning “from the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction” (VI, p.200), Merleau-Ponty came to think that his early work perpetuated some of the reflectively distorted inheritance he sought to challenge. I think it’s essential to see the fleshy ontology developed in his final text as an attempt to address any residual Cartesian diplopia, yet one which is engaged in the same interrogation of experience of which science, for instance, provides only a second-order account.

One example of how this motivation plays out is through Merleau-Ponty’s mature analysis of the phenomenology of the Other. As we saw in chapter five, Merleau-Ponty recognises that our inescapable perceptual faith reveals that, whilst other people open onto the world distinctly, we each fundamentally experience the same world. Merleau-Ponty came to think, however, that this perception clashes with his earlier ‘philosophy of consciousness’ because it’s not clear that alternative openings could be *presented* in the requisite (i.e. positive) manner to consciousness. The Other, recall, opens onto the same world and so isn’t given,

¹¹¹ This is a tricky task, given that the text remained unfinished in Merleau-Ponty’s lifetime. In what follows, I explore what I take to be the most compelling interpretation of it.

phenomenologically, as a pure lack, but neither is she given as a positivity in the sense seemingly required (VI, p.141). Resisting an objectivistic or naturalistic ontology as his starting point, Merleau-Ponty previously tried to account for the above by appealing to the shared, nondiscursive, anonymity of our experiences. However, Barbaras contends, through this appeal Merleau-Ponty came to think himself caught between two stools: either both parties are reduced to the *same* anonymity “in which all alterity finds itself dissolved” and the distinct consciousness to which the Other is presented disappears, or else, before consciousness, “no alter ego can appear” (Barbaras, 2004, p.38).

Given that such articles of perceptual faith are, Merleau-Ponty says, “beyond proofs” (VI, p.24) this led him to abandon the merely archaeological project of his previous work. *Crucially*, we must remember, this is because philosophy must be able to address alterity in the sense that it may “tell us how there is openness without the occultation of the world being excluded” (VI, p.24); something that phenomenology—*qua* philosophy of consciousness—could apparently never do. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis concludes in an ontological shift according to which subject and object, self, Other, and more-than-human thing aren’t foundational terms, but abstractions from a primary unity: a common flesh which sustains the ontological continuity of its poles. Through our embodied inherence within the same flesh, both ‘I’ and the ‘Other’, therefore, experience the same ‘world’, and the world may truly express *itself* through our differential participation within it. The other party’s perspective, the later Merleau-Ponty thinks, is thereby made to some degree available to me as a “fold” or “hollow” (VI, p.146; p.196) in our shared flesh, rather than existing as either pure presence (object) or absence (consciousness) allegedly previously misconceived as primitive terms.

7.1.1 Does Phenomenology *Require* the Flesh?

Before we explore the flesh ontology itself, it’s important to emphasize that Merleau-Ponty’s own motivation for an ontological shift differs subtly from the task I, and other ecophenomenologists, set for it. Merleau-Ponty thinks that, regardless of any specifically ‘environmental’ benefits of doing so, addressing alterity *even in principle* requires resituating phenomenology in an ontology along the lines of the flesh. I think we can safely dispute Merleau-Ponty’s contention, however, by challenging the claim that phenomenology is *necessarily* a philosophy of consciousness in the requisite problematic sense.

Note that, as we see Barbaras articulate the dilemma above, the phenomenologist either absorbs Others into her own experiential ‘anonymity’, or else she cannot address Others *in* their alterity at all. Thus, Barbaras seems to suggest, phenomenologists are tied to the familiar same/*absolute* Other dichotomy we also see Levinas invoke. However, as I argued over the

preceding chapters, the issue with this characterization of phenomenology is that it rests largely on the false dilemma of presence to/absence from consciousness that, as embodied, the Merleau-Pontian body-subject problematizes. If, as I've argued, nondiscursive *grounds* of experience form the basis of the body-subject's anonymous bond with the world then, *as grounds*, these are never simply and unambiguously manifested at the level of full experiences. Thus, the appeal to common perceptual anonymity doesn't entail dissolution of alterity because, at the level of whole perceptual expressions, one may only ever be partially implicated both in the world and the Other's opening onto it. This was, after all, why Kruks may claim some insight into her colleague's pain, without levelling down that pain to a manifestation of her own. It's also why Merleau-Ponty can talk meaningfully about a dung beetle's teleological intentions without subsuming the dung beetle's world into his. If I'm right about this, then the sort of ontological turn Merleau-Ponty prescribes isn't *required* for the in-principle appreciation of alterity in any obvious sense.

We might also ask what Merleau-Ponty means to designate by the term 'philosophy of consciousness' which makes such philosophies necessarily incompatible with the appreciation of alterity. Merleau-Ponty cannot mean to suggest that we should abandon the irreducibly revelatory nature of first-person experience. Even for the later Merleau-Ponty, "[t]here is certainly no question of abandoning the viewpoint of consciousness" (Barbaras, 2004, p.128) because that is where the all-important experiential alterity is manifested. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty insists that the flesh shows itself only indirectly through first-person experience (VI, p.175). His is an ontology apparently required by the revelations of experiential consciousness; it is a radicalization of phenomenology, rather than one which breaks with it. What Merleau-Ponty appears to have in mind is that an unsurpassable barrier to alterity is erected by philosophies which understand consciousness as a Sartrean nothingness or "retreat of not-being" (PP, p.400), as Merleau-Ponty does in some later passages of the *Phenomenology*. Conceived as such, the Other's differential phenomenal opening *couldn't* be recognised by another phenomenological subject because, strictly speaking, there would be no-thing to be presented as such.

But this problematic theoretical commitment is one that Merleau-Ponty shouldn't have made in the first place. Firstly, because, as Toadvine (2009, pp.74-5) notes, Merleau-Ponty thereby reifies a problematic dualistic cleavage under which the "personal self" of human reflective consciousness becomes ontologically discontinuous with the unreflective "natural self" of animal life in a similarly exceptionalistic manner to those we criticised in Descartes and Meillassoux; something I have also used Merleau-Pontian phenomenology to speak *against*. To detach motor intentionality from act intentionality in this radical manner would

be grossly misleading and, at least according to my reading, at odds with the broader (more plausible) Merleau-Pontian account. Secondly, in setting up perception as a dialectic between being and nothingness in the Sartrean sense, Merleau-Ponty seemingly undermines his own warning against taking perceivable things to *be* pure positivities. It isn't obvious that his reflective invocation of a Sartrean ontology is even compatible with the Gestalt ontology from which Merleau-Ponty's account begins, and which provides much of its ecophenomenological merit.

Yet, this problematic theoretical commitment is one that Merleau-Ponty *needn't* have made either. Merleau-Ponty had earlier remarked that phenomenology must be "*practised and identified as a style or manner of thinking*" (PP, p.viii) rather than understood in terms of a commitment to the axioms of phenomenological texts. Conceived as such, genuine phenomenology cannot *begin* from a commitment to Husserlian, Schelerian, or Sartrean accounts of consciousness. Rather, the question for the radically-reflective phenomenologist is whether these philosophies best deal with the phenomena they're employed to explain. I hope to have shown above that, like the later Merleau-Ponty himself, we can see that they do not. Moreover, we have reason to believe that these philosophies of consciousness are based on reflective abstractions which serve to exclude or obfuscate the phenomena available for expression. I refer most pointedly to the axiological meanings which, as Plumwood's trees neatly suggest, may exist *within* the things themselves; meanings which, I've suggested, are phenomenologically basic, yet which cannot be supported by the Sartrean model for much the same reason that they don't typically show up for natural scientists: the apparatuses employed by those disciplines admit only positivistic entities to the sphere of being-in-itself. Nevertheless, especially given that Merleau-Ponty understands phenomenology to be primarily an archaeology of experience, I see no obvious reason why, independent of further theoretical commitments, Merleau-Pontians *must* accept the problematic terms of the Sartrean schema and thus situate phenomenology as a philosophy of consciousness in the necessary sense¹¹².

The other issue that troubled Merleau-Ponty was that the approach adopted in the *Phenomenology* requires "prereflective contact of self with self", or a "tacit cogito", to justify beginning analyses from the viewpoint of consciousness (VI, p.171). However, since any

¹¹² Merleau-Ponty apparently initially thought that a Sartrean ontology followed from the freedom humans possess to negate their "vital situation" via reflective consciousness (PP, p.400). However, as Toadvine (2009, pp.73-5) notes, Merleau-Ponty was merely acting under the influence of Max Scheler, whose philosophy Merleau-Ponty *rejects* because of its sharp nature/consciousness binary. There is no implication or entailment relation from one to the other. It's misleading, therefore, to think that the capacity to reflect itself *requires* the phenomenologist to understand consciousness as nothingness, especially where one takes the heterogeneity of mindlike properties sufficiently seriously.

process of reflection or reduction requires language—complete with its “sedimented significations”—the ‘tacit cogito’ cannot seemingly be primordial in the requisite nondiscursive sense (VI, p.171). Consciousness is, according to the later Merleau-Ponty, something linguistically or culturally constituted. In Merleau-Ponty’s late essay ‘The Child’s Relation with Others’, he supports this hypothesis empirically. Following Jean Piaget, he argues that developmental psychology shows the unified “I” of consciousness to be derivative from the primary state of “anonymous collectivity” or “undifferentiated group life” into which one is purportedly born (CRO, p.119). One only learns to differentiate oneself from Others (at six or more months of age), he claims, by first learning—under the influence of language—to see their bodies *as other*. Thus, according to the later Merleau-Ponty, consciousness—and even one’s body schema—are derivative from the primacy of an undifferentiated flesh¹¹³.

Although, if substantiated, Merleau-Ponty’s claims would provide reason to think that phenomenology must be resituated within the flesh ontology, we can have grave concerns about their force. Shaun Gallagher and Andrew Meltzoff, for instance, draw upon recent work in cognitive science to argue that, although children occupy an irreducibly intersubjective world, it is a world in which one possesses, from birth, a “primordial” or “‘embryonic’ notion of self”, and one in which “*experientially*, and not just objectively, we are born into a world of others” (1996, pp.226-7). If Merleau-Ponty were right about our primordial state of indivision, they argue, then the “invisible” imitative behaviours Meltzoff observes in newborn children (e.g. where a child mirrors others’ facial expressions, despite being unable to see their own face) would be straightforwardly impossible; a hypothesis that Merleau-Ponty himself concedes (CRO, pp.116-7; Gallagher and Meltzoff, 1996, pp.220-1). If Gallagher and Meltzoff are right about these basic nondiscursive aspects of our experience then we’re given some vindication in beginning analyses from a phenomenological viewpoint, because the self of the ‘tacit cogito’ appears to be more than a ‘solipsistic’ abstraction. Furthermore, since Gallagher and Meltzoff argue that even newborn children must possess a relatively well-developed body schema to behave as they do, we’re given further justification in adopting the sort of model generally explicated in the *Phenomenology*.

Much more could be said about all of this. If I’m on the right lines with the above, however, then our Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology isn’t necessarily incompatible with the balance of occultation and openness necessary for the appreciation of more-than-human alterity, even without any further ontological commitments of the kind Merleau-Ponty posits. The model

¹¹³ Some ecophenomenologists (e.g. Jensen, 2002; 2007) use arguments from this text to justify a radically egalitarian, deep ecological ethic that (mistakenly) draws its warrant from the undifferentiated fleshy kinship one apparently shares with all bodies.

explicated throughout most of the *Phenomenology* appears, therefore, to be at least theoretically compatible with the appreciation of alterity, even without recourse to the flesh. If so, then we can safely return to our guiding ecophenomenological question for the remainder of this chapter: does turning to the flesh facilitate an *improvement* in our ability to address the more-than-human world—in its alterity—over and above our current ecophenomenological model? To answer this question, I shall attempt to unpack Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh.

7.1.2 What is the Flesh?

Contrary to Foucault's (1977) contention, the later Merleau-Ponty never claims that there exists in each 'natural' thing a perpetual presentation of its own, self-sufficient meanings waiting to be amplified. In the context of the flesh, expressive truth is the culmination of a natural *logos* which calls to, and is called for, by that (reflective) articulation. Since both poles are truly only bifurcations of an original ontological unity in the context of which they gain their identities, it's erroneous to speak of *my* delivering the world's meanings like some sort of expressive midwife. Rather, each true perception of a more-than-human entity is an abstract moment of the movement between poles that expresses the meaning of the whole; it is the "self-palpitation of the world's flesh" (Toadvine, 2009, p.96). By resituating the thrust of expression on the side of the world in this manner, the flesh purportedly affords the improved possibility of dialectically addressing more-than-human entities *on their own terms*.

This is no less true where expressions differ. The flesh accommodates "identity within difference" (VI, p.225) because the aim of perception isn't coincidental return to some natural meaning of a worldly thing, but the self-expression of fleshy truths via the movement between poles. The essential alterity of the Other's opening is retained because divergent expressions may simultaneously express the same world left unexhausted by any expression. This same reasoning means that even nonsubjective things—and the more-than-human world itself—retain their own radical alterity, since their truths aren't exhausted by any expression. As I explain in section 7.2, a key source of the flesh's environmental potential allegedly lies in providing solid ontological grounds through which to retain alterity by refusing to reduce the world's meanings to anthropocentric or anthropomorphic representations-for-us.

Merleau-Ponty's paradigm example of where one may glimpse the flesh comes through the observation that, when I clasp my hands, I may feel my right hand as touching or touched, but never both simultaneously, because the body's imminent self-perception "always miscarries at the last moment" (VI, p.9). Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that between "my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment" (VI, p.123). The two

exist in a *chiasmic* relationship which is emblematic of identity-in-difference because, as Toadvine notes, experience refuses to either assimilate or juxtapose “touching” and “touched” (2009, p.113).

One’s embodiment provides the essential ontological continuity for chiasmic encroachment: it is only because one’s hand may be touched that it may itself touch; that one may be seen that they may see. Merleau-Ponty argues that “in this sense they see and touch the visible, the tangible, from within. Because our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things with which it nevertheless is surrounded, the world and I are within one another, and there is no anteriority of the *percipere* to the *percipi*” (VI, p.123).

The reversibility of our bodies stands as an “*exemplar sensible*” (VI, p.135) for the purportedly *necessary* intertwinings between self, Other, things, and world. The flesh ontology thereby licences a profound shift in how we conceive our epistemological and ontological relationships with the rest of the world. Rather than one’s embodiment affording the *possibility* of a dialectic with the more-than-human world because of its erosion of a difference in kind between subject and object, sharing a common flesh affords the *same* imminent reversibility we see between touched and touching hands. Hence, “[t]here is no problem of the *alter ego* because it is not *I* who sees, not *he* who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general” (VI, p.142). The reason for this emerges once we abandon consciousness as the “primordial definition of sensibility, and... rather understand it as the return of the visible upon itself” (VI, p.142). The flesh is the ontological ground of a “natal bond” we share with *all* more-than-human entities; a bond which philosophies of consciousness believe they “can comprehend... only by undoing it in order to remake it, only by constituting it, by fabricating it” (VI, p.32) and, therefore, reflectively misrepresenting it. It is by returning to this ‘natal bond’ that Merleau-Ponty affords the promise of addressing the more-than-human world on its own terms.

Of course, this self-other reversibility can only ever be imminent otherwise one’s body would cease to be a boundary of sorts and the other party’s alterity would be implausibly lost. This is why, despite radical ontological connaturality between poles, philosophy cannot aim for primitive coincidence between any (reflective) articulation and its underpinning *logos*. True expression is only possible because there exists a fleshy gap (“*écart*”) to accommodate the hyper-dialectical movement (VI, p.7; p.148). This divergence between poles enables Merleau-Ponty to speak of perception enabling a ‘good error’ which expresses truth, but only because both poles of the chiasm (and the flesh affords a multitude: sensible-sense and nature-

culture, for example) are primordially enveloped within the same flesh whose truths unfold *themselves* through the expressive movement.

So, what *is* the flesh? Merleau-Ponty stresses the ‘elemental’ primordially of the flesh, but this doesn’t make it a separate kind of stuff¹¹⁴. This “tissue”, he stresses, “is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency and a *flesh* of things” (VI, pp.132-3). The flesh is a “*general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea”, or “the concrete emblem for a general manner of being” (VI, p.137; p.147). Particular instances of visual perception aren’t, at base, intentional relationships *between* two poles (i.e. vision and visible object) but rather of “visibility in general” or, as Barbaras says, “a single dimension of visibility and, consequently, variants of each other” (VI, p.149; Barbaras, 2004, p.201). The flesh, therefore, doesn’t require us to reify a distinct entity over and above the multitude of possible (overlapping) poles we may find in our worked-over analyses, although these poles truly exist *as themselves* only in terms of their particular expressive crystallizations¹¹⁵.

Since the later Merleau-Ponty reconceives expressive movements between poles as dialectical or dialogical manifestations of the flesh’s auto-affection, however, the flesh *does* seem to decentre consciousness in the necessary manner to licence claims like the following: “One can say that we perceive the things themselves, that we are the world that thinks itself—or that the world is at the heart of our flesh” (VI, pp.136-7). These underscore the apparent ecophenomenological appeal of the flesh over and above Merleau-Ponty’s previous model.

7.2 The Environmental Potential of the Flesh

Whilst the above makes it plausible to speak of what the world ‘means to say’, this shouldn’t be taken too narrowly. Isis Brook emphasizes that the sensible-sentient chiasm is a “remarkable variant” of a common flesh rather than constituting its sole nature (Brook, 2005, p.360; VI, p.136). Despite their clear appeal for legitimating a straightforwardly reciprocal human-world dialectic, the animist, subjectivizing implications that some commentators have drawn from the flesh, therefore, fall foul of the generalization of a particular remarkable chiasm¹¹⁶. Merleau-Ponty stresses that “[w]hen we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology, to describe the world covered over with all our own projections leaving aside what it can be under the human mask” (VI, p.136). Merleau-Ponty also stresses

¹¹⁴ I leave aside whether Being and flesh are synonymous.

¹¹⁵ This interpretation chimes with Robert Vallier’s (2009).

¹¹⁶ See Abram (1996a), for instance. Although Abram is elsewhere explicit that his is a “creative reading” (Abram, 1996b, p.83) of Merleau-Ponty, this shouldn’t satisfy our concerns since—despite their incompatibility—Abram evidently thinks he’s expressing the ‘unthought’ in Merleau-Ponty’s work (see section 7.3).

that the flesh “is not hylozoism: inversely, hylozoism is a conceptualization—A false thematization” (VI, p.250). As Melissa Clarke (2002, pp.216-8) and Brian Bannon (2011, p.332) note, by appropriating the more-than-human world under the narrow terms of human or humanoid experience (i.e. as exactly the sort of dialogical *subject(s)* we criticised in Warren and Merchant), such animism would undermine the alterity of things that the flesh was, partly, inaugurated to explain.

Despite this setback, there may be benefits to be drawn from our primary engagement within the flesh. Brook (2005, p.361) suggests that co-instantiation in the flesh would dramatically limit the extent to which expression could be anthropomorphized because ‘nature’ (and any meanings therein) couldn’t be reduced to our construction of it. This may prove important for our capacity to address the more-than-human world by diminishing the residual force of any *de facto* correlationist charge. To explain: I suggested above that Merleau-Ponty’s previous model didn’t *entirely* curtail the concern that, as a situated body-subject, one is prone to unwittingly impose the terms of engagement specific to that purview onto nonhuman entities. The concept of expressive truth employed in the *Phenomenology* mitigates this problem in two ways: by admitting of multiple true, yet divergent, expressions of the same world; and by recourse to the sort of radical reflection that may bring one’s imposition of onto-epistemological violence to the fore. Nonetheless, according to the model explicated in the *Phenomenology*, one is only *partially* implicated in the rest of the world and Others therein. The space for anthropomorphic misrepresentation or construction essential to the charge is, therefore, left open to some degree. However, if, in the context of the flesh, perception becomes “the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body” (VI, p.146), then our capacity to address the world on its own terms appears to improve. This is because the later Merleau-Ponty situates expression, not ambiguously *between* body-subject and world, but rather within the *auto*-affection of the flesh, from which both poles (as only secondary abstractions) derive.

Moreover, if *all is flesh* and the poles of the flesh are inherently *reversible*, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, then his ontological shift appears to facilitate something roughly equivalent to an intersubjective dialectic with the more-than-human world. This isn’t, as Abram (1996a) repeatedly contends, because nonhuman entities become straightforward dialogical subjects under the flesh. Rather, it is because the later Merleau-Ponty’s is a radically decentred ontology, under which any reflective expression about a worldly entity is always already licenced by the flesh from which both poles derive, and which provides their ultimate justification. Given one’s privileged access to a fleshy medium through which to communicate, one may, through the dialectical movement of expression, literally be able to

question the things themselves and reliably appreciate the answers (i.e. truthfully express the meanings) they provide without subjectivizing those entities in a misleadingly anthropomorphic sense.

One final benefit is that Merleau-Ponty's later ontology licenses a radical rethinking of the human/nature dualism by situating the human-nature chiasm in the context of the flesh. Since, as I argued in chapter three, human/nature hyperseparation licences the colonial assumptions characteristic of our current naturalistic paradigm, decentring our praxis in this new light offers promise. Although, unlike some commentators, I don't think that the primordial "kinship" (VI, p.133) the flesh reveals between parties would straightforwardly necessitate deep ecological commitments—which would prioritize identity over difference in that particular chiasm in a suspiciously dualistic manner—a successful fleshy ontology may at least cause us to rethink our expressions of these relationships¹¹⁷.

7.3 Tensions in the Flesh

Contrary to appearances, however, a suitably rigorous account of fleshy truth needed to secure these additional benefits seems to necessitate a desituated "soaring over" (VI, p.111) and thus violates the remit of (even a radicalized) phenomenology. Although neither the outline of the ontology itself nor truth claims drawn from it must possess a Cartesian level of certainty, to be of significant merit for our current *ecophenomenological* task, there should be some method or yardstick, over and above the tools already licenced by Merleau-Ponty's earlier model, by which the flesh facilitates improved (if fallible) judgements regarding the likelihood that one has uttered a truth rather than misconstrued the world's own *logos*. In this section, I aim to

¹¹⁷ See Abram (1996a), or Kleinberg-Levin (2008). Despite criticizing Abram for making this inference about deep ecology, Bannon (2011, pp.352-5) commits a similar error via his reduction of the flesh to nexuses of relations between ecological entities; an account, therefore, also at odds with Merleau-Ponty's radicalization of phenomenology. Plumwood (2001, pp.12-6) suggests that deep ecology is hostile to alterity insofar as it equates self-interest with the interests of the broader ecological community. Deep ecologists, she argues, invoke one or more of the following problematic views of selfhood: the 'indistinguishable self', the 'expanded self', or the 'transpersonal self'. The first strictly *identifies* 'self' with 'nature' and, therefore, self-interest with the interests of the whole biotic web or cosmos, so it is incompatible with appreciating an individual entity's differential needs or wellbeing where these cannot be equated with one's own. The 'indistinguishable self' viewpoint is intimately related to the homogenizing eco-holistic schemas we've criticized in Callicott, Fox, and Crutzen. The second viewpoint 'expands self' to include *empathetic* identification with the totality of worldly entities. This viewpoint (which Plumwood attributes to Arne Naess) is problematic insofar as it cannot critique the logic of egoism, but rather expands it without reserve. The result is that, whilst Naess (1973), for instance, seeks to acknowledge the plethora of needs and interests in the more-than-human world, these can ultimately be registered only to the extent that they can be *incorporated* into one's own. The 'transpersonal self' view requires an impartial identification of 'self'—reflectively purified of all interests and commitments—with each entity constitutive of the 'natural' world. Since this viewpoint is incompatible with appreciating the *particularity* of individuals and their local responsibilities and needs, however, it too is non-accidentally related to tendencies towards homogenization and universalism of the ilk we've criticized in Singer and Callicott.

clarify why the flesh cannot grant these and so constitutes no significant improvement on the ecophenomenological model explored over the preceding chapters. Doing so requires exploring tensions between alterity and reversibility.

Recall that the environmental promise of the flesh is facilitated largely by its reversibility which, in our case, extends from the body. In order that expressions shouldn't become solipsistic or, at best, anthropomorphic, Merleau-Ponty claims that

[t]he body unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two laps... It is the body and it alone, because it is a two dimensional being that can bring us to the things themselves, which are themselves not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above.

(VI, p.136)

Thus, Merleau-Ponty hopes to facilitate dialectical expression of the world's truths through one's embodied inherence in the same "carnal being" (VI, p.136) that one shares with more-than-human Others. A relationship of encroachment between fleshy poles allows Merleau-Ponty to claim that, through the hyper-dialectic, "the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen" (VI, p.139).

One's relationship with the Other is, therefore, purportedly that of a "Sentient in general before a Sensible in general" (VI, p.142). Given that this (inter-)relationship seems to echo the experiential reversibility of one's hands—and is provided impetus through our unshakable conviction that we each share the same world—Merleau-Ponty argues that "[t]he handshake too is reversible" (VI, p.142). It is this reversibility, to emphasize, which licences an alleged improvement in our ability to address the world on its own terms. Nonetheless, if self-other reversibility mirrors the reversibility of one's own hands, it becomes very difficult to know what to make of it without missing the other party in *their* alterity, either by an excess or a lack.

7.3.1 Missing Others by a Lack

The claim that the later Merleau-Ponty misses Others by a lack is made by Luce Irigaray. At face value, the handshake seems subject to a self-Other chiasm under which we share an imminent reversibility because my experience "does not notably differ from that of the others" (VI, p.146), presumably because we both partake in 'general' relations of sensibility, and so on. However, for reasons like those we explored with Fanon and Young in the previous

chapter, Irigaray denies this contention and holds that, since any such reversibility merely normalizes one's own experience, it results in a "labyrinthine solipsism" (1993, p.157) inherent to the ontology of the flesh¹¹⁸. Recall Merleau-Ponty's claim that 'it is not *I* who sees, not *he* who sees, because *an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general*'. At least when contextualized within the flesh, such statements seem to take Merleau-Ponty's various claims about anonymity beyond his own experience and de-situate them as transcendental truths about *all* (human) beings. Thus, the problem of the *alter ego* is erased, Irigaray thinks, but only by levelling down differences to the problematic 'masculine' anonymity described, at times, in the *Phenomenology*¹¹⁹.

Taken in its strongest sense, the experiences of two human beings sharing very similar bodies and social norms aren't strictly reversible. Given that we've already ruled out their animate subjectivization through inherence in the flesh, the pregnant silences of *more-than-human* entities are surely further beyond our reach. If *my* account of what the *world* (or, perhaps, the Arctic tundra or 'depleted' rainforest) wishes to say relies on an implausible reversibility then any improved possibility of expressing rather than obfuscating its meanings is stifled, and Merleau-Ponty's claim that the two poles share a fundamental identity is unwarranted. This would be devastating for the claim that, through the flesh, one may better address the world's truths on its own terms.

Moreover, taking Irigaray's arguments seriously, even the sexuate markings of one's human body, for example, may (come to) shape one's account of intersubjective participation in, and account of, any flesh. Since one's situated embodiment affords only a partial opening onto the world and, ultimately, any flesh, therefore, we have reason to think that one's *fundamental ontological account of the flesh* will itself be similarly skewed by one's limited mode of participation in it, but to a more extreme extent. It's difficult, therefore, to see how the benefits of serious environmental engagement outlined in section 7.2 could remain valid because both one's experience and subsequent account of the flesh will, seemingly, always be dominated by anthropomorphic (and andromorphic) projection, rather than addressing it on its own (inexhaustible) terms.

But there is a certain irony in this revelation, given that it was this very concern about (eco-)phenomenology's propensity to subsume the more-than-human world into an anthropocentric

¹¹⁸ Remember that the descriptions of experience from the *Phenomenology* haven't been roundly dismissed in Merleau-Ponty's later work. He's trying to provide firm ontological grounds for why our experiences are as they are.

¹¹⁹ Note that this objection would only be fatal for the position advanced in the *Phenomenology* if we mistook Merleau-Ponty's approach there to be necessarily foundationalist.

horizon that motivated our investigation of the flesh's capacity to provide a proxy for intersubjective dialectic in the first place. If turning to the 'general' relations of the flesh implicitly encourages us to overwrite alterity in the manner Irigaray suggests, however, then such an ontological shift would constitute a move *away* from genuine openness to the more-than-human world. Under Irigaray's interpretation at least, co-instantiation in the flesh appears to licence the same problematic 'shortcut' to the other party that Sullivan rightly links to the imposition of onto-epistemological violence. For Irigaray, the flesh merely ontologizes and, thus, naturalizes the hegemony to which phenomenology is already prone.

Of course, Merleau-Ponty never claims that I can flip from my experience of another's sensibility to experiencing *her* sentience, despite the fundamental generality of these terms. He's aware that to do so would be to undermine her essential alterity and the movement by which meanings come to fruition in the flesh. Bannon (2011, p.332-3), therefore, moots one response (i.e. Clarke's) to our quandary: to accept its terms and concede a fundamental *asymmetry* in reversibility. At first blush, however, as Bannon recognizes, this appeal will help little. Asymmetry would ensure that any meanings one locates in the world remain vulnerable to the same charge of anthropomorphism which the flesh—in its apparent capacity to facilitate radical human-world reciprocity—is employed by ecophenomenologists (like Brook above) to curtail. Moreover, Clarke (2002) seems to think that—as a sensual relationship in which they cannot partake—reversibility simply cannot extend to inanimate things. This would mean that a problematically asymmetric reversibility may be permitted between us humans and the perspectives of the axolotls or hyraxes that we seek to accommodate in a view-from-everywhere. However, there could be no reversibility whatsoever regarding the meanings I might claim to find in retreating glaciers or rising sea levels. In either case, the flesh ontology *itself* facilitates no obvious improvement in terms of one's ability, as a situated human body-subject, to reflectively uncover those rich meanings, nor to disrupt one's imposition of onto-epistemological violence. By following Clarke's lead, alterity is apparently salvaged at the expense of openness, yet—as our earlier exploration of absolute alterity demonstrates—*both* are necessary for ecophenomenologists to secure the reduction in violence that the flesh promises over and above Merleau-Ponty's previous model.

Bannon argues, therefore, that if we accept that the essential epistemological and ontological continuity between parties is achieved *only* through “the projection of a perceptual structure found within human (though very likely all sentient) experience” (2011, p.333), then both our *fundamental ontological account of the flesh* and *any* meanings licenced by it will

constitute anthropomorphic, or at least biomorphic, projection¹²⁰. If the poles of the flesh—including what the flesh ‘wishes to say about itself’—*lack* its purportedly characteristic reversibility, however, then a turn to the flesh licences little increased hope of truly expressing the world’s own “*latent intentionality*” (VI, p.244). In fact, our current ontological context puts us in a *worse* position to accommodate nonhuman alterity than under Merleau-Ponty’s previous model because the fundamental grounds of any ‘reciprocal’ human-world dialectic are, here, simultaneously both unavoidably asymmetrical and apt to conceal that asymmetry under the guise of the auto-affection of the flesh.

Alternatively, we might hold that Irigaray straightforwardly misunderstands fleshy reversibility. Clarke is certainly right about the implausibility of imminent reversibility being completed, not least because, for the later Merleau-Ponty, the divergence between poles is essential to express truth. It seems, therefore, that the *pure reversibility* between poles implied by Irigaray’s critique is ruled out *a priori* because it would close this (fleshy) gap¹²¹. Merleau-Ponty, therefore, evidently means to say more than that one’s experience of the Other’s sentience, for example, simply happens to miscarry at the last moment. Perhaps this is an occasion on which it is misleading to use the touching of one’s own hands as an *exemplar sensible* since, being part of the same body, one’s hands *can* oscillate between touching and touched in a manner simply untrue of intersubjective or inter-objective experiences¹²². Pure reversibility would be straightforwardly inconsistent with Merleau-Ponty’s central account of the alterity involved in divergent openings onto the more-than-human world. Moreover, pure reversibility would apparently preclude access to entities which lack sentience, yet which still maintain latent meanings to be expressed. Since the problem of alterity was one key motivation for Merleau-Ponty’s ontological shift and fuels part of its corresponding ecophenomenological appeal, I think that we can rule out the pure reversibility interpretation.

A more plausible interpretation is informed by Merleau-Ponty’s contention that poles are *individually incomplete* co-determinants in the true expression of meaning. According to this interpretation, ‘reversibility’ refers to the world and body-subject’s co-expression of truths; truths which are true *in*, and *because of*, the divergence between them. However, since each pole only becomes what it truly is through the expressive movement, neither is anterior to the

¹²⁰ We shouldn’t, however, neglect Irigaray’s objection to Bannon’s claims about the structural homogeneity of perception apparently experienced by all sentient creatures.

¹²¹ ‘Pure reversibility’ refers to the claim that one can more-or-less transparently take up the position of the other party.

¹²² Levinas (1993, pp.96-103) makes a similar point. Whilst the touched/touching experiences of each hand have minor qualitative differences, there remains an *imminent* pure reversibility since one can always transparently imagine what the other side would be like. Levelling down the impossibility of doing so with regard to Others is exactly the problem Irigaray identifies.

other and any expression *is* as much one party's as the other's. This helps to explain Merleau-Ponty's contention that "each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them" (VI, p.139). Given that both poles contribute to the flesh's self-expression, this also explains why it *is* true to say that "[e]xpression does not refer to a perspective *upon* the world, a perspective that would be distinguished from the world; expression is the world itself, *as* the world putting itself into perspective" (Barbaras, 2004, p.233). Reversibility needn't entail, however, that mine is the *only* sort of perspective through which the world may express itself. Chiasmic logic, suitably resituated, may therefore provide the means by to resist any problematic residual anthropomorphism in the phenomenological account.

The central problem with critiques like Irigaray's, the argument goes, is that they try to incorporate the doctrine of reversibility at the level of situated consciousness which, by assimilating poles, inevitably undermines the alterity of thing perceived. It is more plausible (and, despite a few careless turns of phrase, in keeping with Merleau-Ponty's final text) that reversibility relates to the fundamental, fleshy level and doesn't straightforwardly translate to subsequent levels in which we abstract consciousness and object. This account of reversibility may still problematize the other party's *absolute* alterity by beginning from *beneath* a philosophy of consciousness. *Reversibility in the flesh* may thereby facilitate an improvement in our capacity to recognise encroachments between parties through a unitary ontological heritage that licences some grasp of the 'general' relations that we may share, and may explain the primordial faith that we truly experience a common world, albeit in heterogenous ways¹²³. Merleau-Ponty, however, repeatedly emphasizes "overlapping *and* fission, identity *and* difference" (VI, p.142, emphasis mine) in the flesh, so reversibility needn't entail reduction to the same.

7.3.2 Missing Others by Excess

If reversibility is truly maintained only at the fundamental fleshy level, the genuine alterity of other parties may be retained at subsequent levels of investigation. A very strong claim to the legitimacy of identity-in-difference is also maintained because radically divergent or 'mutually-exclusive' expressions may be simultaneously true. Under this interpretation, for instance, it would be erroneous to claim that the world wasn't singing *itself* through Merleau-Ponty's perceptual experiences simply because they cannot be reconciled with Fanon or Young's. The world's silent *logos* can manifest itself in many distinct expressions without

¹²³ Merleau-Ponty's conclusion that one's *experience* 'does not notably differ from that of the others' now seems overdrawn. However, it's at least plausible that this claim might have been tempered in the editing process had the text been completed.

either exhausting itself or undermining the doctrine of dialectical reversibility which is pivotal to the flesh's ecophenomenological appeal.

The danger in our alternative characterization, however, is that it's difficult to see how such a strong commitment to identity-in-difference wouldn't cause one to miss the other party by an excess because, *if all is flesh*, then almost *all* expressions seem to be made true merely in virtue of being hyper-dialectically expressed. If so, then our alternative interpretation would thereby risk undermining the alterity of more-than-human entities, since almost any expression of 'their' truths would be true by default, regardless of what is expressed. By purporting to maintain such a strong claim to alterity, our alternative interpretation seems to naturalize even *radically* anthropocentric expressions through the logic of the 'good error'. If all is flesh, then the only straightforwardly 'bad errors' would be those that *entirely* overwrite pre-reflective alterity. It's not clear that even radically anthropocentric expressions are committed to doing so, unless they maintain an exclusive and exhaustive claim to truth. Thus, although not exclusively so, some of the viewpoints environmental philosophers set out to challenge by appealing to the flesh, such as the 'masculine' perceptual frameworks that underpin exploitative technoscientific behaviours, for example, would seem to become justified under this model¹²⁴. Furthermore, given that exploitative technoscientific expressions would be *no less true* than others, it isn't clear that the flesh would heighten or even retain the impetus for Fischer's call to heed alternative—and, one wants to say, more warranted—viewpoints necessary to facilitate more positive coalition strategies of environmental engagement.

It gets worse. Since all is flesh, the flesh purportedly licenses a further chiasmic relationship between the 'silent' world of perception and the linguistic world of *reflective* expression. Thus, although philosophical reflections are always historically and culturally situated—and *necessarily* so, since reflections are only thinkable within one's culturally-contingent language(s)—the noncoincidence between poles constitutes another 'good error'. The 'error' is, again, 'good' because the thinking body-subject is implicated in 'carnal being' through their fleshy embodiment, so there exist the requisite relationships of encroachment and divergence between poles for the world's own truths to be expressed, but not exhausted (VI, p.120). The nature-culture chiasm is significant here, since one's discursive or culturally delineated reflective expressions are themselves manifestations of what the world 'means to say' and constitute a "screen" (VI, p.150) without which the world's *logos* couldn't be shown.

¹²⁴ See Brook (2005, p.361).

If the logic of the ‘good error’ makes virtually all expressions true, then our problem from what Barbaras calls the dimension of “sensibility” is replicated at the level of “intelligibility” (2004, pp.304-5). A very strong principle of identity-in-difference would allow almost all reflective abstractions—perhaps even dualistic neo-Cartesian contentions about ‘inert’ or ‘worthless’ nature—to be *just as true* as the reflections contained within Merleau-Ponty’s final text¹²⁵. Since the appeal of Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology in general—and the flesh in particular—lies in providing a more positive and critically (self-)reflexive account of one’s relationship with(in) the more-than-human world, it is markedly damaged if it ends up legitimating not only almost all perceptions of, but also almost all reflections on, the world as genuinely reversible expressions of *its* silent *logos*.

It might be tempting to think that this issue isn’t as serious as I contend, given that I’ve problematized a correspondence theory of truth which would otherwise demand that the aforementioned neo-Cartesian judgements coincide with the world’s essential properties. Moreover, I’ve also suggested that *some* reductive scientific expressions, where well-informed, might constitute regionally true models of the world as constituted by ‘natural resources’, ‘carbon deposits’, and so on. At least when reconfigured within the context of expressive truth, their theoretical apparatuses often *limit* rather than straightforwardly misrepresent the phenomena in question, and so surely express *something* true of the world’s meanings, even if they cannot *themselves* admit the richer range of meanings to be found there.

Nonetheless, we should be reminded that we’re exploring whether, in lieu of a straightforward intersubjective dialectic with the more-than-human world, fleshy ‘reversibility’ may provide *improved* means of addressing our imposition of ontological and epistemological violence and, ultimately, grasping the more-than-human world on its own meaningful terms. But if *all* expressions are somehow constitutive of the flesh’s auto-affection, then in most cases it’s difficult to see how there could be ‘better’ or ‘worse’ expressions of nature’s *logos* at all, let alone how the flesh ontology itself could make us *more* critically (self-)reflexive about the meanings we claim to find in the world’s physiognomy. Moreover, if the flesh’s self-expression also requires movement between intelligibility and sensibility, then we appear to sacrifice even the fruitful sort of critique which is licenced by understanding scientific expressions like Crutzen’s, for instance, to be only second-order abstractions from phenomenological experience. If the flesh requires reflective expression for its meanings to come to fruition, then we surely cannot grant any sort of deliberative priority

¹²⁵ Again, so long as the neo-Cartesians in question don’t maintain an *exclusive* and *exhaustive* claim to truth (as they ordinarily do).

to the latter over the former, nor can we obviously grant nondiscursive grounds of experience priority over discourse. Both are just different moments of the same expressive movement.

The central issue, then, is that the expressive movement by which truths apparently come to fruition in the flesh isn't obviously (self-)critical in the requisite manner to licence something even roughly equivalent to the intersubjective hyper-dialectic required to address our (meta-)theoretical blind spots. Barbaras claims that Merleau-Ponty's later "philosophy of expression brings forth a *regressive* approach that, starting from culture and language, interrogates their originary soil" (2004, p.59). Since the world loads every (situated) expression of it, yet resists exhaustion, the hyper-dialectic is incomplete. The hyper-dialectical movement itself cannot even be thematised, Merleau-Ponty thinks, without being reduced to a distorting reflective philosophy in which poles are reified. Barbaras, therefore, claims that "[w]hat defines interrogation, as pure interrogation, is that the question accepts no answer that would conclude it" (2004, p.141). In one sense, we can accept Barbaras' claim since we don't seek reflective coincidence between, or reification of, dialectical poles as ontologically primitive terms. The impossibility of either route, however, suggests that the flesh itself could *never* furnish us with any substantive additional guidance by which one expression could be thought to be better than another. This is problematic insofar as, in the present ecophenomenological context, the flesh is charged with providing *improved* means of facilitating critical (self-)reflexivity over and above those already licenced by radical reflection in Merleau-Ponty's previous model. By resituating expression within the context of the flesh's auto-affection, however, the hyper-dialectical movement appears (at best) to call for *more*, not *better*, expressions of 'natural *logos*', which is an odd (and, in this context, deeply problematic) use of the term 'interrogation'.

7.3.3 The Yardstick Problem

Thankfully, Merleau-Ponty doesn't subscribe to this 'all true' hypothesis. In fact, he thinks (wrongly in my view) that it is only because one inheres in the flesh that one may provide a rigorous and coherent account of truth in the first place. To explain: Merleau-Ponty thinks that, by bifurcating subject and object, we invert critical reflection such that we can only ever return to *our own* perceptions for truth conditions by which to judge our expressions. Even under Merleau-Ponty's earlier phenomenology—which problematizes the subject/object binary, yet retains the first-person viewpoint as the ultimate court of appeal—the way that things appear always to some degree reflects the situated way one *happens* to explore them. In this context, (reflective) expressions are prone to be anthropocentrically, anthropomorphically or, at a push, biomorphically biased in a similar manner to the one that concerned Bannon above.

The flesh affords a route out of this reflective cul-de-sac, Merleau-Ponty thinks, because one's primordial conviction about the truth of a state of affairs is underpinned by the fundamental fleshy reality on which one's expression depends. One's perceptual expectations are satisfied by the real because it is real; something doesn't become real by being expected (VI, p.40). Likewise, expressions of the meanings made available by more-than-human entities satisfy us because they are true, they don't become true by satisfying us. Of course, this was also largely true of his previous model, under which the world always retains a brute presence in our expressions of it and, thus, constrains the 'real'. I think that Merleau-Ponty is unfair to his earlier work in suggesting otherwise. Nevertheless, the flesh is meant to provide further justification for one's interrogative judgements because one's grasp of 'reality' is derivative from a primary unity between poles. Toadvine, therefore, suggests that the flesh limits which meaningful expressions could be thought to be successful (2009, pp.127-130). Within the flesh, he claims, there exist indicators of reality on which to draw because it is within the flesh that one's true vision—as an instance of 'visibility in general' which somehow predates the subject-object chiasm and so isn't subject to the same residual concerns about anthropomorphism—for example, inheres¹²⁶.

So, what are these indicators? Toadvine suggests that, for the later Merleau-Ponty, an expression should be judged with respect to its relationship to the *logos* that it hopes to express. Toadvine points us to a working note in which Merleau-Ponty speaks of the world's "silent persuasion" (VI, p.214) which true expressions would be able to voice. How, then, to determine whether an expression passes this veridicality test? We can rule out two routes. One cannot look for coincidence between expression and any flesh-in-itself without misunderstanding Merleau-Ponty's later ontology. One also cannot look for coincidence between an expression and a self-sufficient meaning as a pole-in-itself *within* the hyper-dialectical circle. Recalling that 'what the world means to say' becomes itself only through situated expression, one cannot prize the 'cultural' from the 'natural' or 'primordially-given' without misunderstanding their co-constitutive roles in expressing the world's own truths.

Toadvine, therefore, points us to another working note in which Merleau-Ponty claims that "language realises, by breaking the silence, what the silence wished and did not obtain" (VI, p.176). What Merleau-Ponty seems to have in mind is that, by enacting reflective expression (which alone is linguistic and, therefore, able to 'break the silence'), it just becomes clear to

¹²⁶ Merleau-Ponty doesn't mean that the flesh temporally predates subject and object. A "psychoanalysis of Nature" reveals the pre-thematic unity of the flesh at each moment, in a state of non-coincidence, through the subject and object poles it envelops. "A philosophy of flesh", Merleau-Ponty claims, is therefore "the condition without which psychoanalysis remains anthropology" (VI, p.267). The yardstick problem, however, seems to undermine this promise.

what extent one has literally voiced the world's latent intentionality through one's hyper-dialectical engagement with it. This is because, just as the world may only 'sing' through an expressive act, we experience the reconversion of that linguistic expression into an unexhausted natural event, itself to be reflected upon.

In that case, however, neither Merleau-Ponty's unfinished work nor Toadvine's gloss allows us to understand how the flesh might provide better means of identifying the discordance between reflective expression and the more-than-human meanings it hopes to voice. Remember, we're not asking for rigid or infallible truth conditions here, but rather *something* that the flesh may provide, above and beyond Merleau-Ponty's previous model of radical reflection, that facilitates improved means of arbitrating better from worse expressions. However, granted that the interrelational identities of fleshy poles rules out the identification of a reflective target outside the expression itself, this 'something' couldn't be given *in principle*. Put differently: in lieu of its capacity to provide something like a yardstick, it is difficult to see how the flesh *itself* affords improved means of evading the imposition of violence done through the egomorphic, andromorphic, anthropomorphic, or biomorphic ventriloquism to which we are prone. Although the later Merleau-Ponty considers the task of philosophy to be the perpetual "reconversion of silence and speech into one another" (VI, p.129), given the impossibility of thematising any hyper-dialectical reconversion, the sort of yardstick seemingly essential to guide reflection to better express, rather than obscure the world's dialectical interjections and, therefore, realise the potential specific to the flesh, remains necessarily absent from any explanation.

Moreover, as Bannon (2011, pp.335-6) argues, if, for the mature Merleau-Ponty, conceptually-laden human language becomes the *only* means by which to give nature 'its' voice, then our problems of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism actually increase in magnitude¹²⁷. This isn't simply because of the risk of undisclosed sediment within human language¹²⁸, but because Merleau-Ponty also thereby affords human consciousnesses a certain *ontotheological* priority in revealing the more-than-human world's truths¹²⁹. Such a view

¹²⁷ Barbaras (2004, p.169; pp.202-3) sometimes claims that the flesh extends outward *only* from the human body. This must be incorrect, because it would threaten the connaturality of entities by allowing things to *become* flesh through human perception (Bannon, 2011, p.341). Moreover, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly stresses that the flesh cannot be limited to its human manifestations (N, pp.216-7; VI, p.172). By affording primary participation in the flesh to nonhuman entities, Toadvine's interpretation is made more plausible than Barbaras'. A related problem with Toadvine's interpretation arises, however, *if* human language is the *only* means by which to express 'what the world means to say'.

¹²⁸ However, if language is always already "sexuate" (Irigaray, 1993, p.184) there may also be a linguistic problem of andromorphism.

¹²⁹ On Heidegger's account (1969, pp.42-74), 'ontotheology' is the emblematic error of 'Western' metaphysics, which effectively licences a project of anthropocentric mastery by running together the discourses of ontology and theology and, thus, subsuming their respective mysteries and excesses into

effectively limits the scope, and threatens the putative reversibility of any dialectic in a worrying sense because the *only* terms under which the more-than-human world—as a supposed interlocutor—may reveal ‘itself’ are asymmetrically skewed towards the terms of human expression from the outset.

Neither would situating interrogation within this remit appear to do much to counter our tendencies towards anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism if the world may only express itself through the *reflective* terms which are apt to distort, rather than simply refine the phenomena they aim to express. It was, after all, Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of the mistakenly reified (e.g. subject/object or nature/culture) terms of reflective philosophies which motivated his return to phenomenological methodology in the first place. However, if, within the context of the flesh, these terms become the culmination of the world’s silent *logos* rather than a reflective misrepresentation of it, one’s focus is further moved away from the critical self-reflexivity that is pivotal to Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology’s appeal. Of course, Merleau-Ponty needn’t necessarily hold that *every* reflective utterance thereby accurately expresses the world’s truths in the requisite manner. But, even in that case, the flesh *itself* provides no obvious further means to support our judgements about their validity.

Our only real clue to a possible solution comes through what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘*hyper-reflection*’. Since reflection too “makes use of powers obscure to me” in its “distinct act of recovery”, hyper-reflection asks us to suspend our ordinary faith in the world in order to “take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account” (VI, p.38). Ever conscious of the reflective tendency to prejudice what is found in experience through the interrogative terms that one happens to employ, Merleau-Ponty advocates hyper-reflection to uncover the intentional debt owed to the world and, therefore, somehow illuminate the meanings sought by ecophenomenologists. Hyper-reflection purportedly takes place *beyond* the sensible-intelligible conversion and helps one to progressively draw what was true from one’s natural attitude by ‘plunging’ into the world experienced, rather than attempting a mistaken transcendental reflection. Hyper-reflection, Merleau-Ponty thinks, provides improved apparatus to make gradual moves towards this “prelogical bond” (VI, p.38) and, ultimately, to replace illusory or misleading expressions with better ones.

The example Merleau-Ponty uses to illustrate hyper-reflection is a familiar one: where a ‘rock’ breaks up, on closer inspection, to be replaced by a piece of wood. Although each perception is initially ‘real’ and only subsequently shattered, they are, Merleau-Ponty thinks,

wholly intelligible metaphysical systems and objects to which humans have privileged access. Ironically, Bannon (2014, p.135) thinks that Merleau-Ponty’s capacity to avoid ontotheology is the main benefit of his ontology over Heidegger’s.

undeniably progressive approximations: manifestations of the same world and the same, familiar, flesh. We should emphasize, however, that the hyper-reflection licenced by the flesh is intended to provide further *justificatory* grounds to think that one's grasp of the world's meanings improves in the above scenario, over and above the mere feeling that one's expectations are better satisfied. Despite Merleau-Ponty's misleading claim that the hyper-dialectic makes expressions "all true" (VI, p.41), hyper-reflection, therefore, purports to afford a *method* (if not criterion) by which one can come to understand expressions to be better or worse than one another in virtue of their fidelity to the natural *logos* they seek to express.

The glaring issue here, however, isn't only that we're necessarily left without any further success conditions by which to hyper-reflect in earnest, but also that the call to hyper-reflectively *live* the hyper-dialectical movement from *within*—which is, evidently, what is advocated given the implausibility of its thematisation—must be carried out from within one's historico-culturally situated, *human*, body. These concerns yield several interrelated issues, all of which are underpinned by familiar tensions between reversibility and alterity.

Given that neither perception nor reflection are, in any real sense, independent of one another, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly emphasizes the importance of being alive to the intentional commitments and habitual sediment which shape one's perceptions of the world and any reflections on it. Thus, in the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty promoted radical reflection to uncover a similar debt of meaning to the one identified in his final text. Radical reflection also serves to uncover where *unwarranted* sediment shapes perception or reflection in a manner that serves to obscure, rather than clarify the world's meanings. Hyper-reflection, therefore, plays an almost identical role in Merleau-Ponty's mature philosophy. Since, however, no reflections—not even radically-reflective or hyper-reflective ones—can be self-sufficient (this would require a problematic sort of transcendence), even one's hyper-reflective expressions are themselves likely to be riddled with distorting sediment. In one sense, Merleau-Ponty can admit this without issue since, even in his later works, he takes philosophy to be a hyper-dialectical discipline. Hegel remains the museum. Nevertheless, whilst Merleau-Ponty recognises that (asymmetrical) expressions must always be undertaken from within a situation, he doesn't seem to appreciate that doing so without the possibility of further guidance beyond that already effectively facilitated by radical reflection means that—especially in lieu of a genuine equivalent for robust intersubjective dialectic that pure reversibility, although untenable, would provide—the flesh puts one in *no better position* to appreciate where the world's truths are obscured, rather than more accurately expressed. If so, then our turn to the flesh is dealt a serious blow, since its appeal lies in providing ontological grounds that may

afford improved access to the meanings licenced by more-than-human entities *on their own terms*.

Some of Merleau-Ponty's own examples serve to betray this tension between fleshy reversibility and an alleged improvement in openness to alterity. In his late essay 'The Philosopher and His Shadow', Merleau-Ponty disavows any philosophy of history that either situates itself "objectively" as self-contained theory, which would "rob the great philosophers of what they have given others to think about", or as a sort of interpretative ventriloquism: "a meditation disguised as a dialogue, in which we would ask the questions and give the answers" (S, p.149). Instead, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the importance of voicing the "unthought" in the work analysed, thus, "[i]t is indeed in the contact going from one to the other that both become themselves" (Barbaras, 2004, p.69). The problem here is that Merleau-Ponty was talking about Husserl, whose thought, it's generally agreed, he often wildly *misinterprets* by assimilating Husserl's contribution into his. However, through Merleau-Ponty's later account of expressive truth, there could be no substantive mechanism to which one may appeal to justify this judgement, since each philosophy—just like the world's latent intentionality—only 'truly' becomes itself through the expressive movement between fleshy poles.

One major issue in how this plays out is that, beyond the extreme limit cases where something *must* be incompatible with the flesh ontology, we're left wanting. As noted above, *if* necessarily exhaustive, the new Cartesian science would be ruled out because it neglects the alterity retained by a world left unexhausted by a particular kind of opening onto it. However, on my understanding, this sort of position was already undermined by radical reflection because of inassimilable tensions between its totalizing assumptions and an existential phenomenological methodology. Taking up the flesh ontology provides no obvious benefit on this score.

Moreover, recalling that, for the later Merleau-Ponty, expression involves a movement between poles—*both of which inhere equally in the flesh*—one cannot favour either in relaying what the world means to say, even where this involves the nature-culture chiasm. This is problematic in the current context because our rejection of certain objectivistic, dualistic, and utilitarian schemas, for instance, rests to some degree on attributing a certain primacy to nondiscursive grounds of experience that proponents of the flesh ontology cannot obviously admit¹³⁰. Thus, where expressions are neither exhaustive nor otherwise straightforwardly

¹³⁰ Of course, if these accounts rely unambiguously on (e.g. totalizing substance dualist) ontologies which are straightforwardly inconsistent with the flesh ontology, then they would presumably be ruled out by someone who accepts that account. Nonetheless, I'm not sure that many contemporary proponents of the sorts of problematic purview explored in this thesis assert ontological claims which

incompatible with the *basic* ontological stipulations of the flesh, although one wants to say that some carry more warrant than others, hyper-reflective ‘successes’ can be at best intuitively bestowed. Intuitions often vary wildly and yet, in the context of the flesh, which admits of no substantive distinction between discourse and the nondiscursive, one has little recourse to anything further. The most we can require is that one *thinks* that they are being hyper-reflective about their judgements but, given our worries about the clandestine work of sediment, this requirement is surely insufficiently robust to balance alterity and reversibility in the requisite manner to facilitate an *improvement* in the claims that ecophenomenologists want to make about what the world ‘means to say’.

Our issue grows in seriousness where axiological meanings are more obviously central. Take, for instance, the proposed construction of a Patagonian dam which would provide much-needed, relatively sustainable electricity to thousands of homes. Building the dam would also require flooding which would devastate local ecosystems. What would (or does) the world wish to say about this? The answer—or indeed, given that there needn’t be a univocal truth, answers—isn’t (aren’t) at all clear. By restoring the elemental identity of all parties, we’re given no real means by which to promote one’s needs over the other. At most, one must (hyper-)reflect on whether they’re *listening* to natural logos and not *entirely* succumbing to closed-off, abstract ideals¹³¹. However, given the nature-culture chiasm—under which neither pole can be straightforwardly identified with ‘the human’—this needn’t entail that one should necessarily prioritize the wellbeing of the ecosystem. Furthermore, even where one ‘hears’ the world promoting anthropocentric instrumentalism, so long as one doesn’t think that this singular ‘truth’ exhausts natural *logos*, we’re left without recourse to justify our own (nonanthropocentric) agenda over theirs¹³². Remember: in the flesh, one hopes to express the world’s truths and divergent poles are only secondary abstractions. There is, therefore, no egalitarianism entailed by it. Again, so long as the party in question considers themselves to be hyper-reflective about such judgements and their underpinning meanings, there seems to be nothing else we can require of them.

Although this needn’t mean that we engage with their project, the mechanisms provided by the flesh provide no better means of satisfying the question of warrant. I’m not convinced

are *straightforwardly* inconsistent with the flesh account, especially since the flesh apparently licences impossible ontological contentions. Moreover, to the extent that they do, their claims are *already* problematized by the subject-object ambiguity of Merleau-Ponty’s earlier existential phenomenology.

¹³¹ Although, if all is flesh, these ideals retain a curious ontological status.

¹³² In section 7.4, I explore the claim that, rather than *itself* justifying normative agendas, the flesh provides valuable ontological and epistemological grounds in which to reflect on the meanings licenced by the more-than-human world. I will suggest that even *this* benefit is overplayed because the flesh ontology doesn’t motivate improvements in critical self-reflexivity.

by Merleau-Ponty's apparent claim that the *call* to hyper-reflect necessarily undermines the legitimacy of the (e.g. objectivistic or mechanistic) models he disavows; not least because of the latent andromorphism in Merleau-Ponty's own work. To reiterate: the problem isn't that Merleau-Ponty's account is incomplete and so we must import detail from elsewhere, but rather that resituating the hyper-dialectical circle in the context of the flesh entails that there *couldn't* be a satisfactory answer to our problem beyond the (somewhat unsatisfactory) call to hyper-reflect. Of course, alternative answers might be provided, but it would be a mistake to think that these are licenced by the flesh itself, and so the flesh ontology appears to prove more-or-less dialectically uninformative for the specific task in hand.

Ultimately, as I've suggested above, in matters of hyper-reflection, one is apparently left in a *worse* position than when one radically reflects in Merleau-Ponty's earlier philosophy. Although the success conditions for radical reflection are little clearer, the official task of radical reflection is merely to derive conclusions about primordially co-constituted human-world intentionality. Intersubjective dialogue will certainly help to clarify common nondiscursive grounds of experience shared by radically-reflective body-subjects. As Irigaray, Young, and Fanon's criticisms show, however, the project of radical reflection proves incredibly difficult. Merleau-Ponty's later task gets even harder. By situating truth in the context of the flesh, hyper-reflection calls one to interrogate whether one's reflective expressions best voice the world's *own intentions*; a world with which one is purportedly identified at an elemental level, but which may only be addressed from within a situated, human body. Not only is one's reflection entangled with the problematic sediment of this situation, the above analysis has also provided extra hurdles to this interrogation. Firstly, the doctrine of reversibility *cannot* entail pure reversibility and will, therefore, do little to mitigate the impact of sedimentation or reflective distortion at the level of hyper-reflection. Secondly, no appeal can be made to any substantive distinction in priority between discourse and the nondiscursive. Thirdly (and contrary to Merleau-Ponty's protestations), a suitably strong commitment to identity-in-difference on the part of more-than-human entities seems to rule out employing intersubjective agreement as a significant normative marker that one has 'sung nature'¹³³.

Thus, it seems that, in hyper-reflection, one is brought back to one's own historico-culturally sedimented situation to make judgements about the meaningful content of more-than-human reality; ultimately (a few extreme cases notwithstanding, and in lieu of a robust yardstick, infallible acquaintance with the world's truths, or a genuinely analogous nonhuman

¹³³ We're anxious, remember, to avoid a doctrine of pure reversibility and the anthropocentric ontotheology which makes human expression the sole means of access to the world's truths.

interlocutor in an intersubjective dialectic) by whether one happens to think that their reflections better express, rather than obscure, the world's latent intentionality. One is cast back on their own perceptual faith and since, as we've seen Scott argue, one's perceptual faith needn't be a reliable guide to reality, these situated judgements are surely insufficiently robust to constitute any *improvement* in the relationship between reversibility and alterity for the task in hand. Irigaray's criticisms are thus reborn in a new guise: even in the context of the flesh, one's judgements will be skewed by one's limited mode of participation in the world that one hopes to voice; not least because one's account of hyper-reflective progression, rather than regression, is conducted from within this same remit. The potential benefits surveyed above are, then, severely diminished since they rest on the plausibility of the flesh *helping* one to hyper-dialectically uncover worldly things on their own terms¹³⁴.

We're led to a final tension in employing an ontology of the flesh. Given that one is implicated in the flesh through one's carnality, one cannot plausibly survey it from outside in order to make *fundamental* ontological judgements. By undertaking one's judgements from within a situation, however, one cannot plausibly make sufficiently robust judgements about the fundamental nature of things that (necessarily) differ so radically from oneself¹³⁵. Given the criticisms addressed above, nowhere is this tension more keenly felt than where one hopes to advance a fundamental ontology: a theoretical account of *the* ontology of the flesh, which exhaustively describes the pre-experiential ontological situation. Since our judgements are legitimated only by the flesh, a fundamental ontology would also have to bypass the (sedimented) -morphisms and -centrisms discussed above, which is implausible. Thus, we should be wary, as critical environmental philosophers, of taking up such an ontology in the first place.

7.4 A Word on Ontology

I've argued above that the flesh doesn't licence understanding the relationship between poles as any helpfully reversible or reciprocal exchange between dialectical 'interlocutors'. This is because, given the fundamental asymmetry of expression and the impossibility of a fleshy yardstick to guide reflection, hyper-reflection becomes no less introverted than radical reflection. In fact, by refusing some of the tools employed by the latter (e.g. a substantive

¹³⁴ Whilst the flesh requires that no expression *entirely* exhaust pre-reflective alterity, that all judgements must attempt to be hyper-reflective, and that any absolute human/nature bifurcation is implausible, especially given that each of these requirements is compatible with Merleau-Ponty's earlier philosophy, the flesh yields relatively minor victories in comparison to the ecophenomenological benefits it promises.

¹³⁵ Barbaras' contention that the absolute anthropomorphism of ontology is "simply a truth with which we must reckon" won't much benefit the ecophenomenological projects in which the flesh is usually employed (Barbaras, 2002, pp.22-5; Bannon, 2011, p. 335).

distinction in (non-)discursive grounds of experience, or significant recourse to intersubjective dialectic to uncover those grounds), it probably fares far worse. Appealing to the flesh, therefore, facilitates no obvious improvement in affording a nonanthropocentric hyper-*dialectic* over and above Merleau-Ponty's previous ecophenomenological model.

Nonetheless, some commentators suggest (albeit not always consistently) that although this ontology cannot directly entail or authorize specific environmental policies and decisions, resituating reflection within the flesh is useful in instilling a certain mindfulness or sensibility that a profound rethinking of the human-nature relationship licences¹³⁶. Thus, regardless of any capacity the flesh might possess to licence an equivalent dialectic to the one enjoyed with other human body-subjects, the *cast of mind* it encourages is a positive influence on our quest towards less anthropocentric reflections on the more-than-human meanings available for expression. In this final section I want to address in more detail a counterpoint to this claim which I have touched on above: that a move to the flesh appears to be detrimental to the nonanthropocentrism of our ecophenomenological praxis because, in practice, the appeal to the flesh encourages a problematic shift in focus *away* from critical self-reflexivity.

For context: the supposed benefit outlined above cannot be thought to arise simply from the connaturality of parties in the flesh. Even for the earlier Merleau-Ponty, one is connatural with the rest of the world in the requisite manner to facilitate an openness to its differential meanings. Any supposed ecophenomenological benefit must be down to the *specific* way in which the flesh flattens ontology, whereby connaturality is radicalized such that human expression is reconceived to be a constitutive part of the flesh's auto-affection. As I argued above, however, reconceiving of expression in this manner will likely prevent a mind-set of critical self-reflexivity. To reiterate: this is primarily because, by resituating the motor of expression fundamentally *elsewhere* and failing to provide any further identifiable means with which to keep our tendencies towards onto-epistemological imperialism in check, as ecophenomenologists, we appear to become *more prone* to misconceive misleading sediment or our own tacit intentional commitments for the world's self-expression. Vogel puts this sort of concern as follows:

A danger arises if we treat non-human entities as if they *were* interlocutors, as if they *were* making claims—the danger that such claims, just because they can't in fact be questioned, will be treated as *unquestionable* in the sense of being unquestionably *true*.

(2006, p.157)

¹³⁶ See Toadvine (2009, p.133), Brook (2005, p.361), or Fischer (2007).

Let's consider a few diverse examples drawn from the ecophenomenological literature to flesh out this charge. Both Bannon and Monika Langer (1990) hold that the flesh calls for the sort of egalitarian, deep ecological ethic under which we must seek to contribute positively to 'nature', conceived as a heterogeneous fleshy whole. Under Bannon's model at least, the flesh permits "human dwelling" only where it "fosters conditions under which other forms of life (or geography) can flourish and evolve within their own temporal timescale" (2011, p.354). But theirs is not the only avenue that the flesh is taken to legitimate. Gary Madison appears to think that the flesh requires embracing "postmodernism" and "globalization"; Fischer, that it demands founding direct democratic institutions; for Jensen, Merleau-Ponty's "concrete guidance for ecological ethics" is that our primary concern should be to retain species biodiversity; and for Abram, the flesh even allows one to taste the berry in a blackbird's beak (Madison, 2001, pp.179-180; Fischer, 2007, p.210; Jensen, 2007, pp.198-200; Abram, 1996a, p.126).

My point isn't that there's nothing of merit in these diverse and often curious accounts. I want to focus on the fact that each thinker above thinks that *theirs* is truly a manifestation of 'what the world means to say' and each employs the flesh ontology in support of their cause. Yet, as I have argued, beyond the requirement for a 'hyper-reflective' stance, neither I, nor they, have any real means of saying otherwise. In each of the examples I mention above, this limitation is particularly interesting because the flesh appears to have been selectively employed to support exactly the sort of position that the respective thinker *sets out* to advance in the first place. They each take up the flesh ontology primarily because they (no doubt genuinely) think that it 'speaks' to their respective causes or antecedent commitments, and the flesh is intended to provide an extra layer of *justification* to their claims. Whilst I have no in-principle objection to this general sort of move¹³⁷, however, we should emphasize two dangers already identified which relate to employing the ontology of the flesh, specifically, to do this sort of work: firstly, through the ontological flattening it employs, the flesh ontology licences a reduction in our focus on critical *self-reflexivity*; secondly, the flesh provides no further useable tools with which to address our imposition of conceptual violence. Thus, the sort of 'dialogue' allegedly facilitated by the flesh seemingly constitutes a worse framework in which to develop the requisite cast of mind for better engagement with the more-than-human world than Merleau-Ponty's previous model.

Abram (1996a, pp.175-6) provides an exemplary case in point when he discusses the Dreamtime stories of indigenous Aboriginal peoples as definitive instances where the land

¹³⁷ I might be accused of a related move in my appropriation of ecophenomenological tools to disrupt the more problematic strains of anthropocentrism and androcentrism in our 'submerged mass'.

itself provides ethical imperatives of the sort that human beings, typically estranged from our common flesh, have regrettably *become* deaf to. As Vogel (2006, p.157) notes, however, even if specific imperatives are somehow ‘issued’ by landscapes rather than dialogical human interlocutors, at least in the context of the flesh, the question of the accuracy of our translation of any supposed imperative must remain significantly unanswered because that landscape cannot speak—even *in reply*—except through *our* expressions of it¹³⁸. Nonetheless, in Abram’s case at least, it is partly via appeal to the reversibility of the flesh that the aforementioned imperatives come to derive their justification.

Of course, this fact alone doesn’t mean that theirs *isn’t* a true expression of the flesh. As Merleau-Ponty himself contends, Abram, Madison, or Jensen might plausibly ‘grasp’ their respective conclusions (and corresponding resonances in Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology) *because* they are true. But in any case, appealing to the flesh in this manner does little to actively encourage the all-important habitus of critique. Although, as I’ve argued at length, one is always prone to (mis-)characterize the more-than-human world according to one’s own implicit intentional commitments (which, as Abram’s animism shows, will likely include *at least* problematically anthropomorphic ones), given the inherently ‘reversible’ way that the flesh ontology is set up—where one *begins* with the impetus that one probably has the sort of strong intentional commitments one does because they are true expressions of the flesh’s auto-affection—one appears to become *more vulnerable* to overlooking this problem than under Merleau-Ponty’s previous model. This might not prove wholly disastrous when we’re dealing with ecophenomenologists like the above who, by and large, pick up the flesh ontology because they’re interested in its intrinsic relationalism as a means of addressing the environmental crisis. When appropriated by other thinkers who are less interested in this aspect of its potential extensions, however, the cast of mind involved in thinking about the reversibility of the flesh as a site of justification for one’s reflective conclusions appears to threaten the possibility of a suitably reflexive human-world praxis. My basic point is this: the flesh *itself* doesn’t appear to be doing any positive or useful work over and above the chiasmic ecophenomenology offered in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier works.

The above should come with a few qualifications. I’m not claiming that ecophenomenologists do not explicitly employ arguments both in support of the flesh ontology and their respective appropriations of it. All the aforementioned ecophenomenologists

¹³⁸ Vogel thinks that in instances where nonhuman entities contribute to the meanings that we subsequently express it is *impossible* to raise the question of accuracy. I’ve argued that Vogel’s claim is too strong. Nevertheless, Vogel foregrounds an inherent asymmetry in dialectical relationships which appeals to the flesh, partly because claims about what the world ‘wants’ to say are fundamentally unanalysable, are apt to mask.

advance quite sophisticated (although not unproblematic) cases that *their* position results from serious consideration of the sort of radically flattened, intrinsically relational ontology instantiated in the flesh¹³⁹. But even where arguments are offered, we're left with the same two persistent and interrelated issues. The first is that the flesh ontology limits the possibility of our interrogation of it¹⁴⁰. Of course, one can point out controversial assumptions (e.g. does Madison realise that, as global capitalism ironically demonstrates, individual flourishing *needn't* require the flourishing of all unless one adopts a circular or trivial definition of 'flourishing?'), or fallacious entailment relations in argumentation (although ecophenomenologists rarely, if ever, claim that the flesh logically *entails*, rather than implies, the meanings or normative guidance that they suggest). In lieu of a yardstick, this is as far as one can go. But these critical tools don't require the flesh; they are available within Merleau-Ponty's earlier model and so the flesh itself offers little of extra merit for the project in hand.

In any case, situating one's capacity for reflection within the flesh's auto-affection does little to promote critical self-reflexivity about one's tacit contributions to the assumptions which underpin those arguments. This problem isn't limited to extreme cases like Abram's. Resituating the human-nature relationship within the flesh appears to do little to make Jensen, for example, any *more* attentive to the fact that, by beginning her analysis at the species level, she appears to unquestioningly instigate a hierarchy of value which is implicitly set against the recognition of individual entities. Nor does the flesh appear to make Fischer any *more* reflexive about the support she employs for her position when she uncritically promotes the ecologist Joel Kovel's contention that "there is no separation between things; there are only, so far as the most advanced science can tell us, plasmatic quantum fields; one single, endlessly unperturbed, endlessly becoming body" (Kovel, cited in Fischer, 2007, p.206). In doing so, Fischer disrupts the instrumentalist stance of Cartesian mechanism, but only by *desituating* or

¹³⁹ Bannon (2011) and Toadvine (2009), for instance, are led by Merleau-Ponty's (somewhat unconvincing) arguments that the flesh alone prevents phenomenology from becoming a philosophy of consciousness. Toadvine (2009, p.133) then takes the motor of *all* expressive meanings to be 'nature' itself, which explains why he doesn't think that the flesh straightforwardly licences any specific maxim. Bannon (2011, pp.333-5) thinks that Toadvine's radicalization of (human) phenomenology anthropomorphises the flesh and the meanings subsequently licenced by it. Bannon (2011, pp.352-5) argues that nonanthropocentrism requires understanding the flesh in terms of a broader scheme of affective relations. Thus, Bannon advances a flesh ontology which is more ecological than phenomenological, hence his normative recommendations above. As noted in chapter four, however, I'm concerned about the epistemic 'purification' involved in reducing ontology to nexuses of affective relations without reference to the viewpoint(s) from which that ontology is flattened.

¹⁴⁰ It may be true that any fixed ontology limits its terms of interrogation. Nonetheless, the flesh ontology is particularly guilty in this regard since it dramatically limits the possibility of guidance regarding the relative truth or falsity of the expressions it allegedly licences. But perhaps the point (at least for people like Toadvine) is this: *if* one wishes to advance a fundamental ontology, then the flesh seems to be more congenial to doing critical environmental philosophy than most. However, I've argued that one may do critical environmental philosophy more effectively without invoking a fundamental ontology which carries the extra baggage that the flesh requires.

uncoupling the ontology licenced by quantum physics from any phenomenological opening or socio-historical entanglements. In neither case does the flesh ontology facilitate any obvious improvement in terms of genuine openness to alterity or wonder.

As I articulate our overarching problem above, by entirely subsuming subject and object poles into the flesh's auto-affection, individuals appear to be made more prone to distract their attention from acts of critical self-reflexivity. This is plausibly because, in short, that 'self' is understood as only a secondary abstraction from the flesh's larger self-becoming, *just like everything else*. The reader might be forgiven for thinking that we've been here before. In chapters three and five, I criticised ecofeminists and speculative realists for making similar errors. I criticised Warren, Merchant, and Plumwood for advancing similarly flattened ontologies under which nonhuman interlocutors are misleadingly identified as suspiciously similar intentional subjects. Object-oriented ontologists, I argued, make the self-same error by making all objects (humans included) the same kind of intentional entity. In each case, I argued that the real reason for their hostility to alterity is that, by universalizing the terms of their respective fundamental ontologies, they obscure the fact that any such ontology is always derived from a situated phenomenological opening which inevitably colours its norms. Since any subsequent ontology is then given fundamental status, the specificities of that sort of opening are glossed over as 'general', yet conceal a certain (potentially problematic) anthropomorphism or anthropocentrism at root. They each fail to recognise that, even when our aims in doing so are noble, it matters *who* flattens the ontology and *under what terms*.

Of course, the ontological flattening characteristic of the flesh doesn't follow *exactly* the same pattern as progressive naturalism or object-oriented ontology. Those who employ the flesh ontology at least acknowledge the necessity of approaching ontology from a particular type of phenomenological opening (unlike the former) *and* that other openings may be radically and irreducibly different from my own (unlike both former and latter). Nevertheless, the flesh ontology *does* make two parallel errors. It firstly makes the more-than-human world intentional in more-or-less the same manner that we saw Bannon criticise Plumwood for doing in chapter four. Although seemingly essential to the potential for establishing nonanthropocentric dialectical relations within the flesh, by situating the motor of intentional expression in the world itself (complete with specific things 'it wants to say'), Merleau-Ponty appears to asymmetrically *personify* it in a non-revisable manner, rather than affording the possibility of rethinking or addressing it on its own terms. Secondly, by giving the (albeit indirect) flesh ontology foundational priority in subsequent argumentation, one is driven to obfuscate or neglect the concrete phenomenological opening(s) under which the ontology was flattened. Thus, the intentions and 'general' relations that one finds in the flesh will likely be

intimately related to the sorts of onto-epistemic entanglements typical of the partial opening(s) under which the flesh was diagnosed or interrogated and yet, because of the apparent primacy of the flesh, one appears to be made less likely to notice. Conceived as such, the ontological shift at play in the mature Merleau-Ponty does little to encourage the critical self-reflexivity which is conducive to a radically reflective praxis¹⁴¹.

7.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, we explored whether turning to the flesh might benefit the nonanthropocentric credentials of the ecophenomenological praxis I defend. I explored two potential benefits: firstly, that the flesh might facilitate an analogous dialectic with nonhuman entities that an intersubjective hyper-dialectic provides between human body-subjects; and secondly that, regardless of any normative guidance that the flesh might provide, the cast of mind encouraged by resituating the human-nature relationship within it might provide a helpful push away from anthropocentrism in our reflections. I've argued, however, that by understanding one's expressions to be constitutive of the flesh's auto-affection, one is made less likely to focus on our tacit contributions to those expressions. Without the possibility of some further, useable yardstick by which to curtail our tendencies towards onto-epistemological imperialism, therefore, the turn to the flesh proves a retrograde one in terms of our genuine openness to alterity because we appear to become *more* likely to subsume the more-than-human world under the terms of our partial purviews. Thus, especially given that the primary benefit of our ecophenomenological praxis is the sort of critical self-reflexivity that is diminished by a turn to the flesh, we should have grave reservations about taking up the flesh ontology as part of any such praxis.

¹⁴¹ Given the intractable partiality of perspective on the world in which one is embedded, I suspect that Plumwood, Harman, and Merleau-Ponty inadvertently demonstrate a problem common to *all* appeals to fundamental ontology.

Chapter 8: ‘Conclusions’, or: Acknowledging the Place of Unrest

The conclusion reached in the previous chapter might have proven somewhat disappointing because, if no equivalent for an intersubjective hyper-dialectic can be established with the more-than-human world, then there appears to be an inescapable anthropocentrism inherent to the praxis I defend. Moreover, a critic might claim, if disrupting the inherent anthropocentrism of our dominant onto-epistemological schemas is as important as I suggest in addressing the root causes of our crisis situation, then my praxis is not only bound for failure; its failure is also bound up with the seemingly paradoxical task that I set for it. What I want to show in this final chapter is that my hypothetical critic’s worries can be allayed in such a manner as to limit the extent of any disappointment that the reader might legitimately feel. Whilst my critic is right to claim that the praxis I defend is, at least in some sense, both paradoxical and anthropocentric, I shall show by means of a substantial recap that it is in engaging with its paradoxes head on that an ecophenomenological praxis shows its mettle in disrupting the habitual inattentiveness that is complicit in our colonial appropriation of the more-than-human world. To unpack this claim, I will focus here, as I have argued throughout, on how one’s embodiment provides the means by which one both is, and is not, to ‘return to the things themselves’.

Throughout this thesis, I’ve problematized attempts to respond to the environmental crisis that begin by construing it as a series of environmental ‘issues’ (determined by natural scientists) to be ‘solved’ by the right kinds of practical behaviours (the stipulative realm of environmental ethics). By more-or-less ceding ontology and epistemology to natural science in this manner, I’ve argued, we leave the philosophical and political assumptions and commitments which underpin it largely unchecked. At least in the context of environmental philosophy, I’ve suggested, any subsequently plausible solutions to environmental ‘issues’ are thus prone to inherit the normative violence which imbues the limited and utilitarian models that natural science offers us of those phenomena in the first place. If, as I claim, this conceptual violence is intimately linked to the behavioural and attitudinal violence we see enacted in aggressive deforestation, excessive fuel consumption, overfishing, and so on, then any such ‘solutions’ will be of limited merit in disrupting the anthropogenic violence which precipitates our crisis situation.

I’ve suggested that scientific naturalism’s problems stem largely from its underpinning objectivistic assumptions and commitments, which limit its capacity to identify and disrupt

the violence implicit in the models it offers of things. The root of these problems lies in naturalism's fundamental commitment to objective thought, which permits the natural scientist to mistakenly reify a purified 'objective' realm of objects or properties-in-themselves and, thus, conceals the irreducible contribution of the situated body-subject (i.e. the scientist) to the concrete physiognomy of its underlying phenomena. By effectively limiting ontological and epistemological enquiry to the modality of the in-itself, natural science risks naturalizing the terms of epistemic engagement specific to a restrictive and partial purview in a manner that doesn't foster critical self-reflexivity about its underlying assumptions and commitments.

What ecofeminist analyses add to the phenomenological critique of the metaphysical dogma manifested in scientific naturalism is a clear focus on the *political* undercurrent of its objectivistic commitments; an undercurrent which is set against recognition of nonhuman entities (and other Others) on anything more than colonial terms. For ecofeminists, the major problem with taking the objects typically revealed by natural science to exhaust ontological reality isn't just that the scientist makes the mistake of taking himself to be fundamentally passive in receipt of the world's truths. The issue is rather that, in order to construe nonhuman entities *as* objects in the requisite, totalizing sense, the ways in which the requisite 'passivity' is granted to him conceal an implicit hostility towards nonhuman alterity and a problematic propensity towards the sort of onto-epistemological violence of which Bacon is the exemplar. Plumwood, for instance, has given good reason to believe that the inherent *dualism* of the terms under which allegedly plastic or inert material 'objects' are cleaved from minded human 'subjects' is to blame, in significant part, for the instrumentalist stance under which the more-than-human world is subsequently subsumed by those who, like Crutzen, ultimately *reduce* it to a collection of 'natural *resources*'. Thus, ecofeminists and ecophenomenologists argue, successful attempts to address environmental 'issues' cannot simply revolve around which normative policies and maxims to apply to the state of affairs that scientists describe. They must also involve disruption of the problematic (meta-)theoretical assumptions, commitments, and apparatuses which dictate the 'environmental issues' which natural scientists bequeath us and which otherwise constrain what plausible 'solutions' might look like (ordinarily, in terms of more sustainable models of 'resource consumption', and so on).

Ecofeminists like Plumwood are surely right to argue that a key strategy in disrupting the latent dualism manifested in scientific naturalism is to problematize the reductive and hierarchical subject/object binary on which it relies. Despite Plumwood's calls to reconceive of ourselves as more substantially embodied than the dominant 'truncated reversal' of Cartesian metaphysics would otherwise licence, however, a problematic silence persists amongst ecofeminists about the *concrete* role that one's embodiment plays in configuring the

more fundamental perceptual and conceptual world that one inhabits. The problem with this oversight is that, by failing to engage sufficiently with the salience of one's specific situation *as* an embedded body-subject with a partial grip on the world, ecofeminists are often insufficiently radical in their revision of terms. Plumwood, for instance, makes two fundamental errors which unduly constrain her attempt to rethink the terms under which environmental discourses may take place. Firstly, the terms of her progressive naturalism do not admit of the radically heterogeneous intentional realities which may be inhabited by differentially embodied entities. Whilst Plumwood is open to rethinking the subject/object dualism in the form of subject-subject relations, the (arguably neo-Cartesian) terms of these new relationships are still non-accidentally aligned with the narrow purview of the human investigator and, therefore, remain in tension with a radical rethinking of how to address nonhuman entities (like snakes) *on their own terms*. Secondly, partly because of her insufficiently radical rethinking of 'subject' and 'object' terms, Plumwood misunderstands the basic error of dualism to be a conceptual one. Plumwood, like other ecofeminists, is therefore led to underplay the true significance of understanding dualistic schematization to be a more-than-cognitive error and, thus, misconstrues how best to go about addressing the colonial habits responsible for our crisis situation.

I've argued that this is where significant gains can be made by reconfiguring ecofeminist (and new materialist) insights within a Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenological remit. For the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist, one's phenomenological opening is always already subject to the habitual sediment of one's situation as well as the operative demands of one's specific mode of embodiment. These admissions afford an important corrective to the problems faced by ecofeminism because they allow the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist to foreground the *intentional* contribution of one's embodiment to the basic meanings that the world presents. As a result of a keener focus on the salience of one's embodiment, the radically-reflective Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist may be less prone to impose onto-epistemological violence onto the more-than-human world for at least two related reasons. Firstly, because under any such ecophenomenology a body-subject is, as a matter of principle, attuned to the possibility of dialectical denial by the world. This disrupts the sort of anthropocentric incorporation or habitual instrumentalism which continues to permeate (even a 'progressive') naturalism. Secondly, because for the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist, her intractable Gestalt-situatedness makes the error involved in objectivistic or dualistic habits a more fundamental one of *praxis*. Given one's embodied situation, this does mean that a complete transcendental reduction is rendered impossible as a means of identifying and rectifying the problematic metatheoretical terms of debate. I've argued, however, that the tension Merleau-Ponty exposes between one's immanence and transcendence not only

motivates a stance of humility which better facilitates openness to more-than-human alterity, it also allows the Merleau-Pontian to focus on which level to attend to the problem of dualistic schematization: the level of perceptual habits themselves.

By recognising that the *meanings* co-expressed between body-subject and world are ontologically basic, and that the meanings available for expression are non-accidentally related to the specific kinds of situated bodies that we are, the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist is able to embrace a radically nonanthropocentric onto-epistemological norm which may reduce the violence done to more-than-human alterity without deferring to problematically objectivistic notions of how stipulative things-in-themselves *really* are. This comes in the form of a view-from-everywhere which encompasses the intentional meanings differentially expressed by divergent more-than-human entities. Nevertheless, since the concept of expressive truth central to this norm makes hoping for perceptual or conceptual coincidence with the essence of a given more-than-human thing impossible, the above might be taken to exemplify how, for the Merleau-Pontian, one's perceptual embodiment actually *prevents* a return to the more-than-human things themselves. This is the central claim of the charge of correlationism in both general and sexually-specific guises.

If we must abandon the modernist schema of relations between passive subject and object-in-itself as ecofeminists and phenomenologists rightly suggest (for different, though not incompatible reasons), then it seems that (environmental) philosophy is reduced to investigation of the epistemic relations between a given body-subject and the (properties of) objects which are its correlate. Given that the correlational properties thereby revealed are non-accidentally related to the sort of body that one is—or, given that, for any specific body-subject, “the its outnumber the mes” (Bennett, 2010, p.112), the bodies that one is—as a situated investigator, one risks being divorced from a world of genuine Others. According to the speculative realists, the radical alterity which is made plausible by a phenomenological appreciation of the intentional salience of one's embodiment is also simultaneously foreclosed by the impossibility of transcending the narrow terms of body-world relationships available only to perceivers *like me*. If our dualistic and objectivistic tendencies delineate how we habitually carve up the world, then ecophenomenologists may also face a narrower problem whereby *androcentric* sediment colours the allegedly primordial epistemic norms of even ‘perceivers like me’ in such a manner as to perpetuate, rather than challenge, the violence at the core of our enquiry. In chapter six, we saw how this thought played out via the objectifying stance naturalized by Husserl's transcendental reduction.

Since the various ways in which one might understand the meaningful remit of environmental theory from within the correlationist circle (e.g. via Cronon or Vogel's constructivism) concede a problematic hostility to nonhuman alterity, the correlationist problematic is a serious one. Nevertheless, I've also argued that attempts to speculatively transcend the bounds of the correlation are hostile to the sort of radical alterity that more-than-entities must retain under any appropriate reconfiguration of ontological and epistemological terms. This is because speculative realist attempts to resolve the epistemic asymmetry of subject/object relationships either implausibly 'nullify' the intentional contribution of the investigative body-subject, or else—not unlike some ecofeminists and, perhaps, even the later Merleau-Ponty—*flatten* ontology with the result that the way that things play out for a given human 'subject' provide the 'general' terms for epistemic engagement between all entities. However, insofar as they permit epistemic access to more-than-human entities at all, speculative realist approaches are prone to extend to them only the (reflectively distorted) terms of our own worldly experiences and, thus, conceal the contribution of the specific opening from which any such terms are gleaned. We saw how this played out in Meillassoux's neo-Cartesianism and Harman's oscillation between a homogenising anthropomorphism and a problematic absolute alterity. Speculative realists (like most scientific naturalists and ecofeminists, and the later Merleau-Ponty) risk thereby doing violence to more-than-human alterity by failing to take the intentional importance of one's specific mode(s) of situated embodiment sufficiently seriously.

At the risk of labouring an important point, the above is intended to expose two central paradoxes of Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology. One is the insoluble paradox of immanence and transcendence which we explored in chapters two and six. Since all ontological and epistemological investigations take place in the intentional horizon opened up by one's embodied engagement with(in) the world, then one's phenomenological embodiment provides the basic means by which one *must* return to the things themselves if one is to evade schematic terms which are reflectively worked-over in a misleading and problematically anthropocentric or androcentric manner. Under this paradox, however, the phenomenologist cannot 'get back' to the primordial meanings revealed by the more-than-human world, because one is always concretely embedded within a socio-historical lifeworld which rules out the sort of transcendental reduction that might otherwise bring all of one's intentional commitments to one's attention. Thus, even a radically-reflective praxis will never be free from intentional sediment in such a manner as to allow unmediated or transcendental acquaintance with the more-than-human things themselves.

Our second paradox has no catchy name, but it relates to the relationship between specific embodiment and radical alterity. For the appropriately engaged Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist, one's specific mode of embodiment cannot be a 'general' one that can be extended unproblematically to Others. It is this focus on the intentional salience of one's material embodiment which brings to our attention the possibility of radically heterogeneous, meaningful worlds potentially inhabited by more-than-human Others. However, given that one's immanence is intractable, one cannot transcend the remit of one's own embodied situation to exhaustively engage with the divergent worlds of more-than-human Others on the very radical terms that attention to embodiment makes possible. This is the problem involved in any attempt to naturalize the Gestalt structure from 'outside'; a problem which Merleau-Ponty had diagnosed as early as *The Structure of Behaviour*. According to our second paradox, the radical nonanthropocentrism of engagement manifested in any view-from-everywhere is compromised because it will always be somewhat inflected by the operative or habitual norms of the asymmetrical phenomenological opening(s) from which it is considered.

My reason for labouring the point about the paradoxes of ecophenomenology is that I suspect that in these paradoxes lies the root of my hypothetical reader's disappointment. On the face of things, both paradoxes make the same basic point: it is through attention to embodiment that Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologists make radical engagement with more-than-human alterity theoretically possible, yet unobtainable in practice. As some recent ecophenomenologists have noted, an ontology of the flesh promises to mitigate our concerns by situating one's intentional expressions within the world's own auto-affectation. However, as I argued in chapter seven, any reversibility that the flesh could legitimately afford facilitates no real improvement on this front. In fact, by taking up the flesh ontology, one is seemingly led to repeat the error made by speculative realists and ecofeminists under which, by flattening ontology according to the terms of a 'general' or 'anonymous' perspective, body-subjects are made less critically self-reflexive about their acts of violence against more-than-human alterity. In short: through the sort of ontological approach that would, on the face of things, provide a tonic for the background anthropocentrism inherent to ecophenomenology, one risks attempting to make the Other's unfamiliarity too familiar and thus limits its potential to identify and disrupt the colonial violence characteristic of our crisis situation. Ecophenomenology, it would seem, is then unavoidably anthropocentric.

Whilst I don't wish to deny the existence of our two central paradoxes as I've set them up, I do want to argue, as I have throughout this thesis, that the focus of the above debate is too narrow. What we've focused on above is the task of ecophenomenological critique: the content of the second strand of radical reflection (reflection in the world). Another key benefit of the

work done by ecophenomenologists, ecofeminists, and new materialists in problematizing the mind/body, self/other, and subject/object dualisms is to reveal a fundamental connaturality between human and more-than-human parties. The ontological continuity facilitated by the body-subject's carnal embodiment undermines the correlationist charge against ecophenomenology because, even as a situated body-subject, one simply isn't confined to the 'subjective' epistemic prison implicit in the charge. Although one cannot be permitted unmediated, exhaustive 'access' to the more-than-human world's own truths in the manner of a Baconian observer, as a Merleau-Pontian body-subject one is to some degree implicated both in the world investigated and the heterogeneous intentional perspectives of more-than-human Others therein via common nondiscursive grounds of experience. Ascertaining the 'brute presence' of the world in this sense is the remit of our other strand of radical reflection (the world in reflection). Thus, whilst it is true to say that ecophenomenology is unavoidably anthropocentric in the weak sense that the world's normative meanings are revealed to a human phenomenologist, as the arguments of Merleau-Ponty, Plumwood, and Bennett all testify, one is neither entirely, nor exclusively human in the requisite sense for this admission to result in the sort of species solipsistic conclusions that speculative realists claim.

This leads me to why I think that the failure of a turn to the flesh shouldn't prove disappointing for the ecophenomenologist who wishes to do justice to more-than-human alterity through a radically-reflective praxis. I've argued that, whilst a rigorous ecophenomenology may reveal sufficient nondiscursive intertwinings between more-than-human perspectives to afford varying degrees of engagement with them, taking seriously the limitations of one's embodied grip on the world suggests that, as I noted above, the Other really is *unobtainable*. But this shouldn't be a cause for regret since, as Plumwood argues, the normative impetus to exhaustively obtain or possess other entities, even in this epistemological sense, is shot through with the very dualistic politics that we seek to disrupt. The self-same normative political impetus is, after all, partly to blame for the conceptual violence done via our mistaken adherence to the objectivistic lens of scientific naturalism and the behavioural violence that purview licences. What Plumwood argues, instead, is that a more positive politics requires us to understand all theory to be partial and situated, rather than ahistorical and acosmic. The real contribution Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenology brings to this picture is simply—in virtue of its keen focus on the fundamental ambiguity of embodiment—to afford alterity a more radical remit at the same time as affording a legitimate narrowing of the distance in partiality of perspectives between self and Other. If the real value of Plumwood's metatheoretical project lies in her attempt to take seriously both continuity and difference, then hers is a project I would argue that the Merleau-Pontian

ecophenomenologist—through the figure of the chiasm that is so important to Merleau-Ponty’s work—may take up more effectively.

To clarify: permit me to pick up on the spatial metaphors that have punctuated this thesis. By *cleaving* subject and object poles, naturalists ordinarily fail to engage sufficiently with the continuities or isomorphisms between human and more-than-human parties, and so do undue onto-epistemological violence to the underside in a manner that we see manifested in anthropocentric instrumentalism at the level of normative guidance (e.g. via Crutzen and Arias-Maldonado’s imperatives to rectify our crisis situation by *mastering* the more-than-human world). I’ve argued that this holds true, even under the sort of truncated reversal ordinarily manifested in the extensional realist stipulations of natural science (think back to our earthworms and plant intentionality wars). Those who take up otherwise *flattened* ontologies of the ilk discussed in this thesis (i.e. some speculative realists, ecofeminists, and later Merleau-Pontians) on the other hand, fail to engage sufficiently with important differences or asymmetries between those parties and so are apt to carry out related acts of violence via the ‘general’ extension of the terms of specific sorts of embodied experience. The radically-reflective Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist, however, offers us something like a topology of *uneven ground* under which, although there are passages between features (some easier to navigate than others), there are also aspects of the landscape which are, either in part or in whole, in-principle inaccessible to me because of the kind of ambulatory feature that I am (think about Merleau-Ponty’s canines or Bennett’s plastic). But these features nevertheless remain part of the landscape and demand to be considered as such in any debate about how to conceive, approach, or value that landscape, especially when the landscape, or aspects of it, are under threat.

Yet even on this ecophenomenological landscape, all is not always as it seems (I will drop the metaphor here to avoid stretching it beyond all credibility). As I argued in chapters two, four, six, and seven, one cannot think that connaturality affords easy acquaintance either with the world’s nondiscursive meanings, or those shared with more-than-human Others, without violating the requirement for reflexivity about one’s own sedimented and operative intentional commitments. This is why, in order to do justice to more-than-human alterity, the body-subject’s relationship with the rest of the world must remain unrestingly hyper-dialectical as a matter of praxis. Of course, by ruling out an appeal to the flesh, this hyper-dialectic cannot be a straightforwardly reciprocal dialogue with the more-than-human world. But, if my reasoning thus far holds, this ‘failure’ actually serves to better establish the sort of critical self-reflexivity that is most positive about the ecophenomenological project. Whilst, as a body-subject, one is connatural with the rest of the world in the requisite manner to afford

communication with it, one cannot transpose the terms of an intersubjective dialectic onto one's relationship with the *more-than-human* world without misrepresenting the partial, chiasmic opening one has onto it in virtue of the kind of situated body (or bodies) that one is. To do so would be to attempt the sort of 'shortcut' that Sullivan rightly associates with the very colonialism we're employing ecophenomenological tools to disrupt. Contextualised as such, Merleau-Ponty's later ontological turn comes across as an attempt to overcome the asymmetrical terms of the human-world chiasm which, almost paradoxically, represents a big mistake for the attempt to appreciate more-than-human entities in their alterity through a view-from-everywhere.

Nevertheless, it would be a serious blow to our project if, given the residual epistemic asymmetry of the chiasm between body-subject and world, one was left without any critical tools with which to unearth nondiscursive meanings and expose discursive sediment. Such an admission would be fatal for the nonanthropocentric credentials of our new onto-epistemological norm, given that the view-from-everywhere would be reduced to a problematic sort of *de facto* correlationism. But I have argued that this claim isn't justified either. Throughout this thesis, I've suggested multiple hyper-dialectical means (e.g. radical reflection, habitual hesitation, (targeted) intersubjective dialogue, inter- and intra-disciplinary dialectical fecundities) by which body-subjects might plausibly address their colonial imposition of (meta-)theoretical terms onto divergent more-than-human entities. Of course, given the asymmetry and partiality of one's opening onto the world, the focus of these tools is primarily critical, but this admission shouldn't be taken to undermine the nonanthropocentrism of my praxis in any problematic sense. Rather, the habitus of critique which is focal to the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenological praxis I endorse is testament to the seriousness with which it acknowledges the inherently paradoxical nature of the fact that any metatheoretical groundwork must be carried out by a historically-situated and concretely-embodied entity that cannot entirely transcend the terms of the world that they inhabit.

If environmental philosophy is to be critically self-reflexive in the requisite manner to be open to more-than-human alterity, then its paradoxical nature appears to be a truth with which we must reckon. But we should remember that there are real benefits to our ongoing praxis of taking these paradoxes to heart. Taking our paradoxical relationships seriously, I've argued, is also more likely to afford a habitual onto-epistemological humility—or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, doing so allows one to become a 'place of unrest'—in a manner which sets the body-subject in good stead to attend to more-than-human alterity in a suitably radical fashion. Conceived as such, the grounds of the Merleau-Pontian ecophenomenologist's nonanthropocentrism lie in the fact that she 'limps' as a matter of praxis because her

commitment to radical reflection hinders her commitment to unflinching action, including attending to practical ‘solutions’ to pressing environmental ‘issues’. Nonetheless, since addressing the violence implicit in the ways that those ‘issues’ are ordinarily set up by natural scientists is an important part of disrupting the behaviours responsible for our crisis situation in the first place, “the limping of philosophy is its virtue” (*IPOP*, p.61).

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